# Popular Media in the Metropolitan Third Places:
# Exploring the Uses and Gratifications of the Mobile *Homo Œconomicus*

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Commuters in metropolitan regions have developed a number of cultural practices to use between their places of residence and work, including newspaper reading. This practice has been often considered as an instrument enabling individuals to integrate into communities. However, what can the uses and gratifications of contemporary newspapers by mobile workers tell us about the construction of communities in urban areas? This article, based on in-depth interviews with mobile workers-readers and a reception study of their media consumption in Luxembourg, enables us to assess the importance of the ritualized and instrumental use of the popular press by commuters in a changing urban world.

*Keywords: media, metropolitan regions, uses and gratifications, third places, mobility citizenship*

The dynamics of large metropolitan regions are determined by the multiplicity and acceleration of human, capital, and informational transfers organized from the global to the local scale (Sassen, 1991; Veltz, 1996). These metropolitan areas have been represented as key locations of a global and economic "space of flows" (Castells, 1996). Their success in global capitalism depends on a series of media and other communication technologies permitting a frictionless space across political borders and "a time–space compression" (Harvey, 1989, p. 284). This does not mean, however, that the metropolitan place has become less important. It is one spatial component of a multiscalar urban system experienced by social groups and communities that do not all have the same power to control, steer, and undergo flux in the city. As suggested by Massey (1991), "place" in a world of accelerating flows is a location structured by a power geometry of the time–space compression—that is, the differentiated power of people

> in relation to the flows and the movement. . . . Some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (pp. 25–26)

This power geometry presupposes interactions within specific places. These interactions can also be based on the use of urban mass media. The aim of the current article is to investigate a metropolitan newspaper and the power geometry it involves in urban "third places" (Oldenburg, 1989). The third places

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considered here are the in-between and archetypical locations occupied by economic agents (e.g., public transport). The first part of this article explores uses and gratifications theory and its usefulness for characterizing the role of media consumption in metropolitan third places in the current context of accelerating mobility. Following the formulation of the argument and methodology, the results are detailed in three consecutive sections. The first focuses on the self-declared perceptions of the chosen media by mobile users, with a view to grasping their overall relation to media flows in third places. The second section is dedicated to the importance of media rituals in third places and what sort of interconnected mobilities are involved in the ritual processes. The potential instrumental use of media by interacting economic agents is analyzed in the third part. The issue of power geometry is addressed when assessing the uses and gratifications associated with the chosen media. Last, a discussion is developed to define overall media use in the third place and the meta-level factors justifying it. The research is centered on the cross-border metropolitan region of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

**The Uses and Gratifications of the Media in the Liquid City: Conceptual Issues to Grasp Mass-Mediated Interactions in Transitional Places**

The uses and gratifications theory is associated with research into media effects (McQuail, 1994). Analyses using it can be distinguished depending on the role granted to the audience (active vs. passive) and the function attributed to interactions and structural factors in the definition of the uses and needs gratified by the media (Lamour & Lorentz, 2014; Ruggiero, 2000). There has been a tendency to distinguish two broad types of media use: ritual and instrumental. The ritualized consumption of media is associated with its use for diversion (e.g., passing time). This generally implies a greater exposure to and affinity with the medium. By contrast, more active and selective individuals, searching for specific content with the view to a clear goal and subsequent actions, develop instrumental use (Rubin, 2002). Ritualized consumption is more easily related to specific media genres such as entertainment programs, whereas news content has more in common with instrumentality. However, there are not always clear borders between them (Graber, 1994; Liebes & Katz, 1990). Non-media-centric approaches to media studies can be especially fruitful to grasp the true function of media consumption (Couldry, 2004; Moores, 2012; Rodgers, 2014; Tosoni & Ridell, 2016). This type of study helps to achieve a better approach to the connections that exist among people, the media, and a series of places in the world of accelerating flux (Moores, 2012). It helps us grasp more precisely the "interdependent mobilities that produce social life organized across distance and which form (and reform) its contours" (Urry, 2007, p. 47). It further supposes taking into consideration the links existing between the

> corporeal travel of people, . . . the physical movement of objects [including media outlets], the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and people appearing on . . . . multiple print and visual media . . . and the communicative travel through person-to-person messages. (Urry, 2007, p. 47)

The use of media in places opened to flows can be instrumental in shaping a "mobility citizenship" (Urry, 2000, p. 63)—that is, the definition of the rights and duties of people who have to cross a number of physical and nonmaterial boundaries to be part of an urban community on the move (Lamour, 2017a).

Non-media-centric media studies consider that places are open to flows. These opened places are also locations experienced by different sociodemographic groups, whose routinized behaviors and interactions reveal a specific power geometry: a relationship to different flows and movements that are managed, negotiated, or experienced (Massey, 1991). There is, for instance, a relationship to media flows potentially affecting a series of other flows in the urban place. This power geometry is not only based on economic parameters, but also on other factors such as culture and gender (Massey, 1993). From this perspective, the media are some of the cultural forms circulated for the benefit of, and mobilized by, interpretative social groups on the move and constantly redefining self-reflexive societal imaginaries—that is, a "culture of circulation" (Lee & LiPuma, 2002, p. 192).

The practice of media consumption in the urban place can be both an effect and a cause of people's interactions in a given social setting. The work developed by Stamm (1985) is quite fruitful to help grasp this urban media use. He put forward the idea that links favored/caused by media should be distinguished between ties to (1) places, which are more and more disseminated in urban regions; (2) processes, which implies different types of involvement, such as democratic participation or simply professional activities; and (3) structure, a sense of identification with a specific community. The media are used to bridge spatial gaps (e.g., information to plan actual trajectories in the city), political gaps (e.g., news to develop civic-mindedness), and social gaps (e.g., data to define the common social acceptability of phenomena among people with different sociocultural horizons). The city is a space of communication, depending on a diversity of movement and the bridging of gaps in a material and temporal environment (Dickinson & Aiello, 2016). Commuters constitute a specific category of urbanites experiencing this environment, which comprises transitional spaces favoring the consumption of news (Bissell, 2010; Butcher, 2011). Short, mass-mediated stories circulated among these nomadic urbanites can help stabilize an urban (and yet unbounded) imaginary, based on multiple ways of being in the city (LiPuma & Koelble, 2005). Media can help individuals determine some of their behaviors in the moving masses, for instance, the reading of newspapers in public transport, supposed to ensure "civic inattention" (Goffman, 1963, p. 163), which is expected by everyone and routinely reprocessed by all to maintain a distance while still being in the group. People's management of media flows in these transitional places on the move secures their individual position in the group and the collective construction of these places.

The in-between urban locations, combining a multiplicity of functions used by mobile urbanites, can also be termed *third places*. As defined by Oldenburg (1989), these are archetypical spaces, determined by the casual and routinized nature of encounters made up of accidental and informal exchanges, which generally lead to positive interactions developed within them. Oldenburg defines cafés, pubs, and bookshops, but also hairdressers, as third places where social and cultural bonds are reproduced. The link between these specific locations and urban economics seems quite remote. Yet, their existence is an element of economic strength, as they favor the accumulation of social capital that guarantees the business-related trust relationships of communities (Putnam, 1993). These places are specific environments where many private, professional, and public issues are discussed (Calhoun, 1998; Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006). They are different from public spaces that are generally viewed as accessible to all and instrumental in organizing political claims in the city (O'Keeffe & Kerr, 2015). Nevertheless, they can be specific locations where civil society consciousness can also emerge, as proved by the gazette-based interactions in the cafés and *salons de lecture* during the Enlightenment (Habermas, 1989). However, what can the current,

routinized utilization of mass media content in third places tell us about their uses and gratifications for citizens-workers in the fluid urban space? What sort of power geometry in relation to flows is expressed during or following the consumption of mass media content in third places peopled by economic agents?

**Argument, Case Study, and Method**

It is argued that the routinized consumption of media by workers in urban third places is motivated and oriented first by the prerequisite for the development of broad cultural bonds among moving urbanites— that is, the social construction of a casual environment (Oldenburg, 1989). Second, it is expected that this media consumption is determined by the practical needs for strategic workers to bridge a series of spatial, political, and social gaps in the city (Stamm, 1985): to get a series of news to organize their mobility in the urban space. The ritualized practice of media consumption for the sake of cultural bonds among mobile urbanites does not necessarily imply a strong tie with the chosen medium, nor does the instrumental practice of using media content guarantee strong trust in the information delivered. This distance can be explained by the specific "culture of circulation" (Lee & LiPuma, 2002, p. 192), which is created through the interaction between the cultural form circulated in the city (e.g., a newspaper) and the mobile workers.

This research is based on an exploratory and qualitative analysis of the media consumption practices developed by workers employed in the small and urbanized state of Luxembourg. This country has developed its current economic competitive advantage through a dynamic service industry, employing foreign residents— mainly from Europe—but also more than 175,000 workers living in the nearby Belgian, French, and German border regions (Statec, 2018). It is consequently a metropolitan region fragmented by a series of spatial, political, and sociocultural borders, crossed with varying degrees of ease by a number of economic agents. The increasing internationalization of the workforce in the Grand Duchy was considered as presenting an opportunity to offer these workers a popular and easily read free daily paper, as they were not expected to integrate into the Luxembourg national community though using the traditional paid-for media. *L'essentiel*— targeting young, active, and mobile urbanites—has been published since the late 2000s (Lamour, 2016). It is circulated at the entrances to public transport facilities, but also in wider locations such as petrol stations and the doorways of large companies and shopping malls, because the metropolis is relatively small and the business model of *L'essentiel* also requires capturing the public who commute by car. The majority of the 10 to 15 reporters working on the paper's print edition focus their energy on what is going on in Luxembourg, with special interest paid to socioeconomic and mobility issues (Lamour, 2017b, 2019a). The journal generally imports its lighter international content from the French–Swiss newsroom of the free daily *20 Minutes.* French is the language used in the print edition of *L'essentiel* because it is the most commonly understood among Luxembourg residents (Statec, 2017). The majority of cross-border workers entering the country daily, and heavily targeted by *L'essentiel*, also come from the French-speaking regions of Wallonia (Belgium) and Lorraine (France). In total, the print version of this newspaper was able to attract 201,000 readers a day in 2014 (*L'essentiel*, 2014).

The objective of the current research was to explore the practices of *L'essentiel* through interviews and interactions with workers employed in the research sector and the retail economy, which structure a new metropolitan center in the Grand Duchy: Belval. This urban site was chosen for the survey because its workforce comprises many national communities, whose main access to news in Luxembourg would not be

possible through the dominant media in the country (paid-for press, radio, and television), the output of which is generally in German or Luxembourgish (a Frankish dialect). *L'essentiel* is a free paper, addressed to a community of commuters having a basic knowledge of French, and is conceived as this group's main access to information about the Grand Duchy in this urban location. In-depth interviews were carried out with 22 people in the spring and summer of 2013 (nine women and 13 men). There were 14 interviewees who had high professional status and education level (researchers and retail developers) and eight people characterized by a lower educational and occupational level (secretaries and accountants). The interviews conducted in the retail sector were mainly collective (four people were interviewed collectively and one individually), with a copresence of higher- and lower-educated people in the collective interview, plus male managers and female workers. The free daily is used routinely by people in this specific configuration. The situation was different with regard to the research sector. There were six people interviewed individually and 11 within groups. There was a clear differentiation in the collective interviews between those involving exclusively the lower-educated workers (five people including four women) and those with only the higher-educated workers (six people including five men). Different social groups are consequently considered. However, it is important to note that the current analysis is exploratory. It cannot lead to overgeneralized quantitative conclusions related to gender and social classes' use of the media in third places.

All of the interviewees were adults between 25 and 45 years old, and therefore included in the public targeted by the free newspaper in terms of age. Two thirds of them were residents in the nearby Belgian, French, and German regions, and the others lived in the Grand Duchy. The citizenship of the interviewees shows the multinational and balanced composition of the workforce in the country, especially in Belval. Belgian, French, German, and Luxembourg citizens were encountered during the survey (18 people), as well as Southern and Eastern Europeans (four people).

 Following a number of open-ended questions on the use of *L'essentiel*, a number of short articles published in the free daily during the previous few months and relevant to the cross-border metropolitan region centered in Luxembourg were presented to the interviewees. The aim was to find out what sort of news attracted their interest, as well as what they said and did following this selection. The articles were organized into the following five topics, with one topic per page distributed: economics, mobility, social issues, politics, and miscellaneous. Exchanges took place in the fixed third places of interviewees (lunchrooms) or in their working environment (offices). To maintain anonymity, the names have been changed in the current article.

### Passing the Transitional Time-Space with a Popular Paper: Distance, Rituality, and Instrumentality in Third Places

Workers who agreed to participate in the interview and the following reception study turned out to be regular readers of *L'essentiel*. They all read it at least once a week, most of them on four or five days. They access its content through the print edition. This routinized practice takes place in two specific third places: on public transport and in lunch places where workers spend a limited amount of time together. The newspaper also turns out to be their main access to information about events related to Luxembourg. The two Luxembourg citizens on the panel also used other media, but nevertheless, it is *L'essentiel* that is used to shape their interactions with other workers in the two mentioned third places. The strong bond between

these workers, the free daily, and these third places does not necessarily lead to a particular affinity of users for this medium. Indeed, the opposite is true. However, the newspaper is central in shaping a series of ritualized behaviors and a number of instrumental actions and interactions within and beyond the third places. The uses and gratifications of this medium are determined by a specific "culture of circulation" (Lee & LiPuma, 2002, p. 192), involving different types of power geometry related to flows in the city.

### The Verbal Detachment of the Nomadic Press Addicts: The Fast Manipulation of the Poorly Legitimated Press by "Nonmanipulated" Users

The discussions with the interviewees about their daily use of the free paper reveal different forms of power geometry (Massey, 1991, 1993). As suggested by its name, *L'essentiel* targets a public that has a limited amount of time to access news, as these people will read its content in third places used for multiple functions (traveling, eating, interacting on different issues with professional colleagues, using digital technologies, etc.). The "time–space compression" (Harvey, 1989, p. 284) they are not able to control can explain the detached reading habits mentioned by most interviewees as follows, regardless of their gender, educational and professional status, and interests:

- People flick through *L'essentiel* casually, rather than being passionate about it.
- I truly love to read *L'essentiel* to flick through a print newspaper.
- I quickly skim through [*L'essentiel*], because I am not interested in most of the articles.
- [*L'essentiel*?] It is just to flick through, just to see if there is some cool stuff for us.
- I don't read [*L'essentiel*], I browse through it very quickly; "flick, flick."
- I read *L'essentiel* four times a week; it's to catch up with the news quickly in the morning.

Most interviewees also expressed a certain distance from the newspaper's content. *L'essentiel* was not often stated as having the status of a "newspaper," except by two secretaries from the academic sector, speaking without the presence of researchers and insisting that the newspaper is good at publishing various local sundry articles. Both higher-educated workers and lower-educated ones speaking in the presence of their more-educated colleagues expressed their disdain for the paper in different ways. These relatively homogenous narratives were led generally by workers with a university education. The highly educated people expressed a power geometry—a control of media flows in third places—accepted by their colleagues. They have the symbolic power to impose a vision of what constitutes the legitimate news flows in these places. The cohesive and negative attitude toward *L'essentiel* can be associated with the power relations between social classes, even though most of the highly educated workers laughed and interacted during the interviews, based on the trivial(ized) news and local items offered in the daily.

However, the collective attitudes of urbanites toward flows in urban places is not simply a matter of socioeconomic inequalities and dominance, as suggested by Massey (1993). For instance, non-native French speakers pointed out errors in the texts or criticized the daily for its poorly articulated French. It is clearly written by French natives, but "for little children," according to one of the interviewed Luxembourgers. The criticism of non-native French speakers regarding the quality of the French in

*L'essentiel* was always expressed when in the presence of native French speakers. The non-native French speakers also looked at the native ones when making this assertion. They acted as if to distance themselves from a press that could be associated with "French Journalism for Dummies" under the scrutiny of their French colleagues. Accordingly, it is not necessarily the unbalanced economic status of interacting agents that determines the overall condemnation of *L'essentiel* for its supposedly poor French but the cultural differentiation between native and non-native French speakers in the third places.

The poor symbolic value associated with third places such as public transport and lunchrooms was also presented to justify the low respect some interviewees have for this newspaper. These places are not perceived as proper locations to read a "real" daily. It reveals that the power geometry in the city is not simply a matter of media flows accepted/negotiated/refused by mobile people in third places. It is also based on the social categorization of bounded urban places and the less or more legitimate media flows they can attract. The following comment made by Jean, a young French researcher talking in the presence of a French-speaking German colleague, is quite symbolic of this perceived incompatibility between third places and a true newspaper such as the *Monde Diplomatique*:

> Well, it is not pejorative, but it's proof. It [*L'essentiel*] is a newspaper that we can read while eating; it is not a newspaper that demands dedicated attention. We are not going to say, "Well, [I must concentrate] because it's a big article, something truly heavy such as [a text from] the *Monde Diplomatique* [the French elite newspaper on international affairs]." No, it's a newspaper we can read while eating, we can stop because of a phone call and come back to it later, the format is short, we just see the tip [of the iceberg].

Last, the distance expressed by mobile urbanites concerning the use of *L'essentiel* in the third place was also apparent when users were asked about the influence the paper has on them. Most of them denied that it has an influence on their daily lives, on what they say and do following their access to news. They are convinced that they are not manipulated by the newspaper. People with an academic background even expressed some doubts about the level of credibility that could be given to the paper's metropolitan news, whereas others said that *L'essentiel* delivers only neutral information that cannot influence their behavior. Some of them look for confirmation of stories on the websites of prestigious Luxembourg paid-for newspapers such as the *Luxemburger Wort*. The power geometry in the third place is not just a matter of people accepting/negotiating/refusing specific news flows, but also about people attributing different values to different news flows in this third place (the print and poorly trusted free daily vs. the digital and strongly trusted traditional dailies). The sum of criticisms addressed by the readers of *L'essentiel* to their daily free newspaper leads one to suppose that the reading habit has a somewhat ritualistic background.

### *The Ritual Glue of the Time–Space Compression: Briefly Stabilizing the Metropolitan Community of Commuters*

There was clearly a ritualistic orientation in the media consumption practice of the interviewees. As suggested by Carey (1995), the ritual orientation of communication does not aim at circulating messages in space, but helps maintain society over time through a set of shared beliefs. *L'essentiel* is circulated in the

city, but its use by the interviewees is based on a short and inevitable immobilization in a compressed time-space (Harvey, 1989): a space that has been obliterated over time because of the constant technological revolutions and improvements that facilitate the massive transfers of people and information in the expanding city. The ritual use of *L'essentiel* is related to different "interdependent mobilities that produce social life organized across distance and which form (and reform) its contours" (Urry, 2007, p. 47).

First, there is the interdependent "corporeal travel of people . . . [and] the physical movement of [media] objects" (Urry, 2007, p. 47) in the space of urban flows. Interviewees pick up the paper at the entrance to their office or train station, just like their colleagues before them and the ones following them in a mundane daily migration. Denis, an employee in the retail sector, described in an individual interview his attitude concerning *L'essentiel*, consisting of grabbing the daily on the way to work, clearly without any dependence on it: "I wouldn't miss *L'essentiel*. We take it because it is there [at the door]. If it was not there, we wouldn't go and search for it." Here, the "we" refers to a collective movement of commuters.

Second, the ritual is based on the time-limited connection between "corporeal travel of people . . . and the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and people appearing on . . . multiple print and visual media" (Urry, 2007, p. 47). The interviewees stage a series of standardized attitudes involving eye contact and body language when reading their newspaper during the shared time in third places—that is, a process of "civic inattention" (Goffman, 1963, p. 163), helping individuals keep a certain distance and shaping commonly expected casual interactions. The specific content of *L'essentiel* can interest the community of workers and attract the eyes of individual readers—and the consequent observation of others and the attendant body language—without any verbal exchanges. For instance, Charel, a young Luxembourg researcher surrounded exclusively by male colleagues when he made his comments, routinely looks at articles presenting scantily clad female celebrities (who are often on the front page of *L'essentiel*, as with any tabloid paper). He mentioned laughing to himself because of the imagined attractiveness of these articles to male commuters using public transport after him. This humorous viewpoint is further prompted by the attitude of male readers around him in the process of admiring the female celebrities. These ocular exchanges are essential to defining the community of some male commuters through its individual members.

The everyday routines and constant adaptation of individuals help them shape a common feeling of being "separately together" in the same migrating crowd. Interviewees expressed this sense of community when they were asked to describe what they are thinking about when they read *L'essentiel* in the same way as the other people around them on public transport. Some mentioned their position in a group that has a unity or where there is a search for unity. For instance, Jeannette, a young middle-management worker, said during an individual interview, "If I can, I look at what they [other commuters] are reading, to find out who [I am travelling with]. It helps to get closer to other people." She is not searching for eye contact and does not use the newspaper to create "civic inattention." Her main objective is to observe her fellow commuters in the process of reading, to develop a sense of community. This community is purely "imagined," as conceived by Anderson (1983), because Jeannette will never know the whole community of commuters reading *L'essentiel*. Her observations help her construct a personal concept of this group of workers on the move. This mental connection can also link readers placed at different times of the day in different spatial locations. For instance, Paul, a senior commercial agent, laughed when talking

about Sophie, his secretarial colleague who he eats with every day: "She has an advantage. When we read *L'essentiel* at midday, she has already read it in the morning [on the train], so she is already laughing in advance when we read certain pages." It is the trivial and light content of the newspaper, but also the trivialized reception of serious news—such as a story of a man injured in a waste collection truck mentioned by two interacting and amused male and female researchers—that help structure the key aspect of the experienced third places, namely their casual ambiance involving imitating attitudes such as the exchange of glances and smiles or communicative laughs (Oldenburg, 1989). However, *L'essentiel* does not only influence the phatic communication of the interviewees during their brief encounters in third places. It also helps organize fruitful actions among, and interactions between, them.

### A Multipurpose Instrumentality for Homo Œconomicus: The Interactive Building of Mobility Citizenship

*L'essentiel* tends to put light content on its front page to attract the attention of readers, such as a large photo of a celebrity, sportsperson, or so on. Yet, on most days, there will also be a headline presenting a weightier piece of news related to the metropolis of Luxembourg. This news item is detailed in the first few pages, along with other serious issues regarding the urban space experienced by its readership. In total, there are five pages related to Luxembourg every day (outside the sport and cultural news), placed in the front section of the daily. The instrumental uses and gratifications of this serious information became apparent when the 22 people were asked to look at the selection of articles proposed during the meetings. The selection made by them, the interactions developed between readers during the participant observation, and the actions developed by readers following the consumption of a news item, show that the free daily is mobilized strategically to use the third place (public transport/lunchroom) as somewhere for physical, political, and social gap bridging in the city (Stamm, 1985). It helps to structure the readers' "mobility citizenship" (Urry, 2000, p. 63).

There was one transversal, serious issue of greatest interest to the surveyed workers of the five topics presented (mobility, economy, social issues, politics, and sundries): the state of urban fluidity offered to the community of commuters and how a number of physical, political, and societal gaps can be bridged. Their interpretation of these gaps, the practical exchanges around them, and the actions taken by individual readers reveal the coexistence of multiple individualities that need to reach a common and enriched understanding of issues. The reception study shows the importance of the most spatially embedded agents around the table—Luxembourg citizens—to enrich this common knowledge following a partial piece of news edited in *L'essentiel*. They are key agents of the community of commuters, eager to take control of their multiple mobilities in the city of flux. For instance, Paul, a senior Luxembourg commercial agent, gave his foreign colleagues some strategic information about car regulations in the Grand Duchy, following a short article in *L'essentiel* on physical mobility. This detailed information, determined by the basically modest print article, could help them all avoid being stopped by the police and consequently could bridge a potential gap in the material city of flows. However, access to the same information can lead to different behaviors depending on a diverging appreciation of the time urgency in the city. For instance, Agathe, a young female researcher and mother of two young children, remembered accessing the Internet immediately to get more information following news published in the printed *L'essentiel* about a policy that would affect her social revenues when her children came of age. The free daily partly influenced her quest for further information

and her willingness to bridge a political gap thanks to better information about her rights in the city. In parallel, Sylvie, a secretary with a child six months from adulthood, did not take any action following the information provided by *L'essentiel*, because she thought she had enough time to get the complementary information and potential advice from trade unions. The third places are among the urban locations experienced by different social classes who do not have similar positions and a similar ability to access informational resources in order to assess their interests and rights in the city (Massey, 1994).

In spite of these differences in time management, there is a clear and cohesive selection of metropolitan news, which pertains to rights and duties in the city of flows that is the definition of a "mobility citizenship" (Urry, 2000, p. 63). First, there was a total lack of interest among interviewees in issues exclusively concerning the national community of Luxembourgers. Stories involving Luxembourg party politics, political scandals in the Grand Duchy, or social problems among young Luxembourgers were perceived as uninteresting, even though a proportion of the respondents reside in the country. These readers focus on the common denominator that secures their presence locally: the state of private investments in the city and two related issues pertaining to the rights and duties to access the business-related social resources redistributed by the welfare state and the daily accessibility of the workplace. The everyday material gap, which needs to be bridged by these citizens-workers, is the physical distance between their residence and their workplace: the *tie to places* as presented by Stamm (1985).

However, the free newspaper is not only a practical tool for finding out about the next roadworks or railway maintenance that would require people to adapt their mobility strategy to maintain or facilitate their accessibility and the overall commuting process in the city. It is also a way to appreciate and/or confirm the duties and the rights of workers, readers, commuters, and the public authorities in charge of the regulation of these material flows: a series of *ties to processes and structures* (Stamm, 1985), related to economy-led movement in the city. The mass-mediatized problems of fluidity on transport networks are, for instance, not that important in themselves. The media interest of the people lies in finding out whether these problems are due to misbehaving or disenfranchised urbanites (e.g., people driving too fast) and/or a lack of competence or capacity on the part of the public services normally in charge of ensuring fluidity in the circulation of workers. This is suggested in the following interactions involving Jean and Hans, respectively, a French and a German researcher commuting daily from their countries of origin and expressing a certain "banal nationalism" (Billig, 1995):

> Jean: [Car crashes] are only of interest if we get some explanation. A serious car accident that leads to a traffic jam in the morning . . . this was the case the other day. We read [in *L'essentiel*] that it was a young woman who died because she had not put her seat belt on. It is a typical interesting piece of news. We had an explanation. I think it is of interest of any commuter to know exactly what happens to them [why they are stopped in the traffic].

> Hans: The [Luxembourg] emergency services intervene quickly [after a car accident]. But the public services are not as fast to clear the roads afterwards as they are in Germany.

Jean: I can say the same when it snows. There is a clear difference [between France and Luxembourg]. We have noticed it.

Hans: I don't say this because I am German. There are also things that can be criticized in Germany, but on this particular point, we are more efficient [in Germany].

Jean: Very often, things get better in terms of traffic when we have crossed the [Luxembourg–France] border [into France].

The interactions among the readers also demonstrate a certain ability to denationalize the state authorities committed to accelerating the flows of internationalized workers to fulfill the demands of a globalized economy positioned in the city. This attitude was found when the workers interacted around an issue associated to a spatial, political, and social gap (Stamm, 1985): access to the social and welfare resources of the Luxembourg state by its workers, regardless of their country of residence. At the time the survey was carried out, there was still a long-standing conflict between the Luxembourg government and a number of cross-border workers' representatives (associations, trade unions, etc.) concerning the student allowances that were being withheld with regard to the children of cross-border workers employed in the Grand Duchy. The article on this issue, included in the ones presented during the reception study, attracted the interest of most readers. It was the article that led to the most exchanges.

The following debates between a Luxembourg researcher (Charel) and a French cross-border researcher (Bernard) on this issue show that the third place (here, the canteen) can be a space of primary disagreements between people separated by physical, political, and cultural borders associated with their respective state-bounded national groups. However, it is above all a space where bordering discourses have a limited legitimacy to secure everyday interactions between the employees of a global economy in the city. The reflective attitude concerning "otherness" beyond nation states—cosmopolitanism—is a fundamental requirement of debordered capitalism in the workplace (Beck & Grande, 2010). As mentioned by Charel, the Luxembourg worker who was initially in favor of the Luxembourg policy that was detrimental to the children of cross-border workers, "no one should feel excluded":

Charel: For me, this article, "All Students Have a Right to the Benefit," it's something. . . . [I've got] some [cross-border] friends who have children, so they will get money from here [Luxembourg] because they have kids who will perhaps go to university. But it is also like a guillotine for Luxembourg. With the money that [the state] has at the moment, we cannot give this benefit to [the children of] all cross-border workers. [The issue is] how can Luxembourg take its neck off the block? [laugh]

Bernard: Yeah . . . it is rather discriminatory . . . the fact of restricting the benefit like that. It was discriminatory. The government should have implemented a complete reform of the system. Maybe the draft law has been suspended. I would say it's discriminatory.

Charel: Personally, I always compare Luxembourg to other countries. I don't know any countries that do what Luxembourg does. . . . [But] in Luxembourg, when laws are

decided, they ought to be more careful when they pass a law. The people who vote in [a law] or draft it should take care that no one should feel excluded, . . . but yes everyone could be affected [by a new law].

**Autopsy of Gratification and Primacy of Commodification**

This qualitative research shows that the popular free press is not generally highly praised among the readers interviewed. Yet, it is a circulated object that fulfills a double objective: (1) the mobilization of trivial(ized) news to ensure the ritualized character of interactions in third places, where more interactive tactics can only be developed in a second stage based on (2) the use of serious news provided by the discarded press to take a degree of control over people's material, political, and social mobility in the city. This serious news can lead to the consequent and individualized search for more detailed information to confirm previous interactions and/or mediated information from *L'essentiel* while being in a third place, for example, by using a smartphone to access supplementary news on more trustworthy Luxembourg Internet sites such as that of the *Luxemburger Wort* newspaper. The urbanites interviewed enter these third places with their free, circulated paper, which is used to facilitate their integration into daily-ritualized groups of commuters, but also to ensure their next migration in a city, helped by the data gathered and enriched in these third places. It helps them bridge a series of gaps. The "culture of circulation" (Lee & LiPuma, 2002) of the interviewees is a processual loop, enabling them to shape, every day and collectively, the consecutive communicational protocols of the third place (phatic communication, strategic communication, and the strategic action of individuals completing their knowledge following the interactions with their colleagues and/or news delivered in the free daily) involving a relatively distrusted media object: the free daily press. Third places can be successively a space of casual encounters and mobility citizenship, partly thanks to the poorly regarded newspaper (see Figure 1). This daily is, however, involved in the formulation of people's urban-based, open-ended identity, which supposes, as suggested by Morley (2001) and Morley and Robin (1995), the presence of a space that is negotiated beyond the exclusive, imagined national communities, as proved by the interaction between Charel and Bernard concerning the cross-border student grant issue.
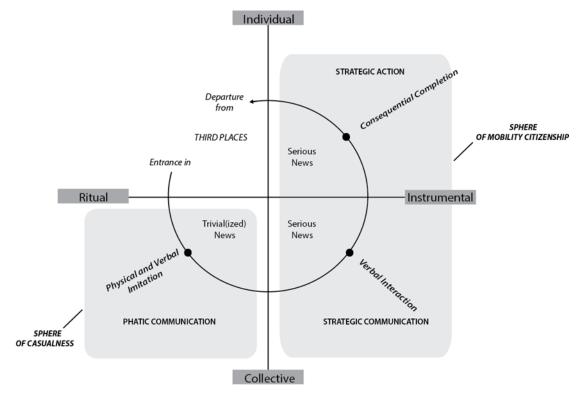
*Figure 1. The processual uses and gratifications of* **L'essentiel** *in third places.*

However, the cosmopolitan, open-ended identity, helped by the Luxembourg free paper agenda (Lamour & Lorentz, 2019), is enacted by structural factors that are perceivable in the broader routines. The main issue when exploring media gratification is to determine not only the social practices anchored by the media, but also the social practices that anchor the media practices (Couldry, 2004; Swidler, 2001). We can say that for its readers, the free daily is one of the objects symptomatic of a culture of circulation, the main driver of which is the commodification of free news written to be consumed by readers-workers-consumers put in motion by a global economy. This economy provides the readers with the necessary revenue to be able to consume the items advertised in the paper. It is also expected for them to read the appropriate functional news mediated in the free press in order to bridge a number of gaps in the city, mentioned by the interviewees. The news agenda of their daily paper is designed to encourage fluid access to the city, as proved, for instance, by the interactions between Jean and Hans searching for data enabling them to assess the reasons behind the short-term reduction of commuting speed in the city. It is the economy-related, daily, and temporary stabilization of this commercial medium and its moneymaking readership in specific nodes located along the commuters' routes—third places—that constitutes the meta-level factor determining the media use of the interviewed readers and the influence of media content on them. The use of *L'essentiel* is "to serve as co-constituents of the given (meta-level) practice, building up media territories that extend across single media and overlap different spatialities" (Tosoni & Ridell, 2016, p. 1287). Nevertheless, this free newspaper can still be viewed as a medium promoting "mobility citizenship" (Urry, 2000), because this

citizenship is related to the constantly changing duties and rights regarding economic accessibility in the city by mobile readers-workers-consumers.

**Conclusion: Investigating Late Modern Lives in Flux with the Media to Hand**

The understanding of the media consumption of workers presupposes taking into consideration the routinized behaviors involving interacting people, media outlets securing these interactions, and the space of lived and imagined places constantly reproduced by communication processes. The application of non-media-centric media studies is a way to grasp these ties among people, objects, and locations (Couldry, 2004; Moores, 2012; Morley, 2001). The current qualitative research into the reading of the free daily press by commuters coming from different social and cultural horizons helps us explore a series of rituals and strategic interactions based on a poorly valued media outlet in so-called third places. Discourses developed about these media, together with the rituality and instrumentality associated with them, reveal different types of relationships to flows and movements in the city. It is apparent that third places are specific urban locations where "the power-geometry of the time-space compression" is expressed (Massey, 1994, p. 149). In the current case study, they are also places with a control of news flows to secure material, social, and political mobility in the broader and yet shrinking urban world. The power geometry in the present example is experienced by different social groups, whose two common denominators are a life put in motion by a global economy and a shared willingness to orientate their mobile existence in the late modern era.

The business model of the free daily paper is based on a fast-changing global media market, structured in bordered and interconnected metropolitan places (Lamour, 2016). The readership justifying the presence of this paper on the market comprises a social world of commuters who use its news content to build a sense of metropolitan place that is an identification with a space made of multiple locations peopled by a community of interacting urbanites on the move. This sense of place can imply a connectedness in a debordered urban space of flows (to protect life trajectories in flux). However, it can also imply boundedness in a sealed urban space of places (to protect life trajectories from flux). This closure and/or opening of the sense of place are visible in the type of news attracting the readers' interest and their interactions around it. The type and treatment of news selected by this newspaper also reveal a preferred sense of place (Lamour, 2017b). Free daily newspapers are a global phenomenon, but their metropolitan agenda and their use depend on the values given to flows and boundaries in the urban space (Lamour, 2018, 2019b; Lamour & Lorentz, 2016).

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