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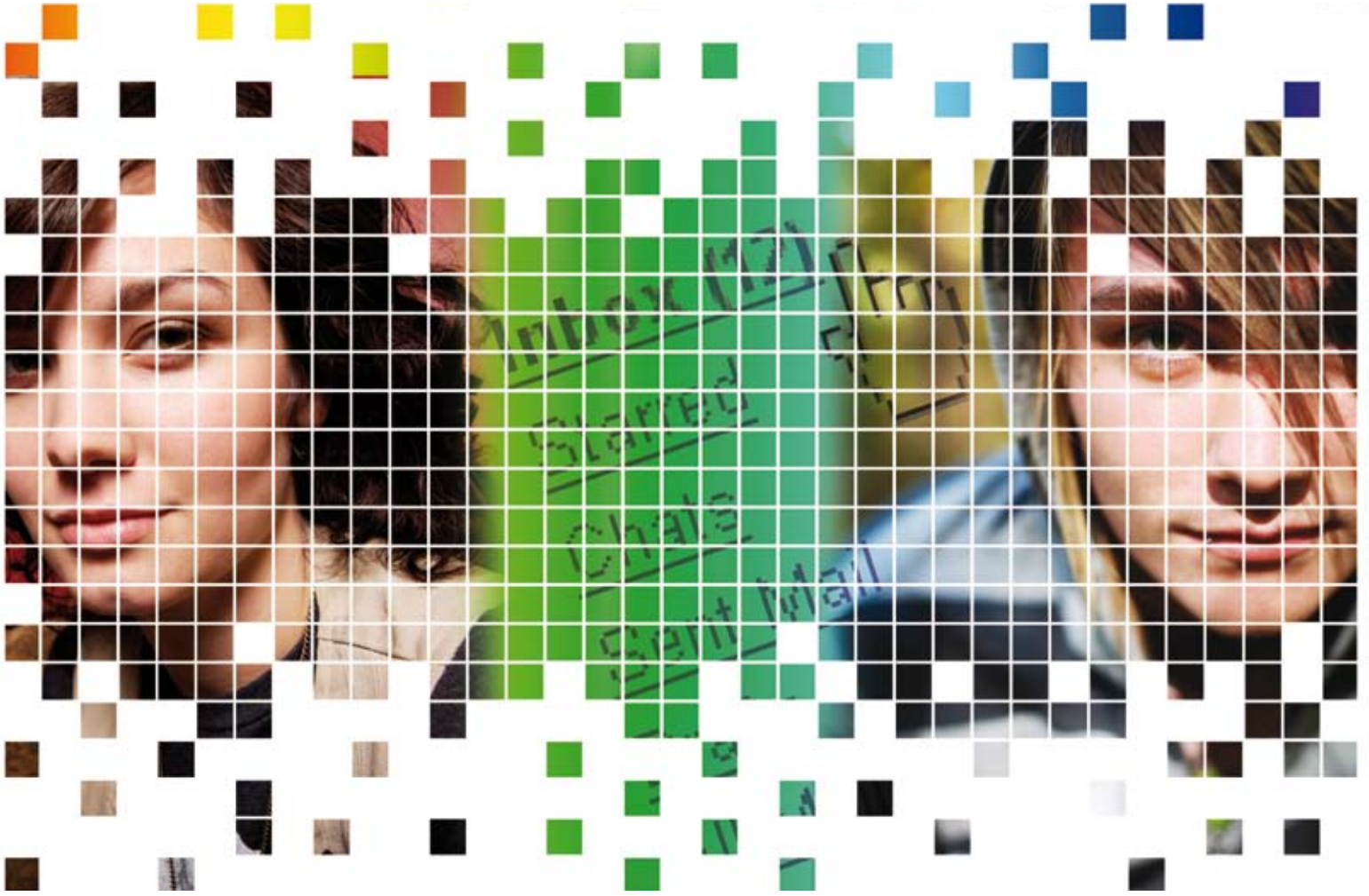
Digital identities:

Tracing the implications for learners and learning



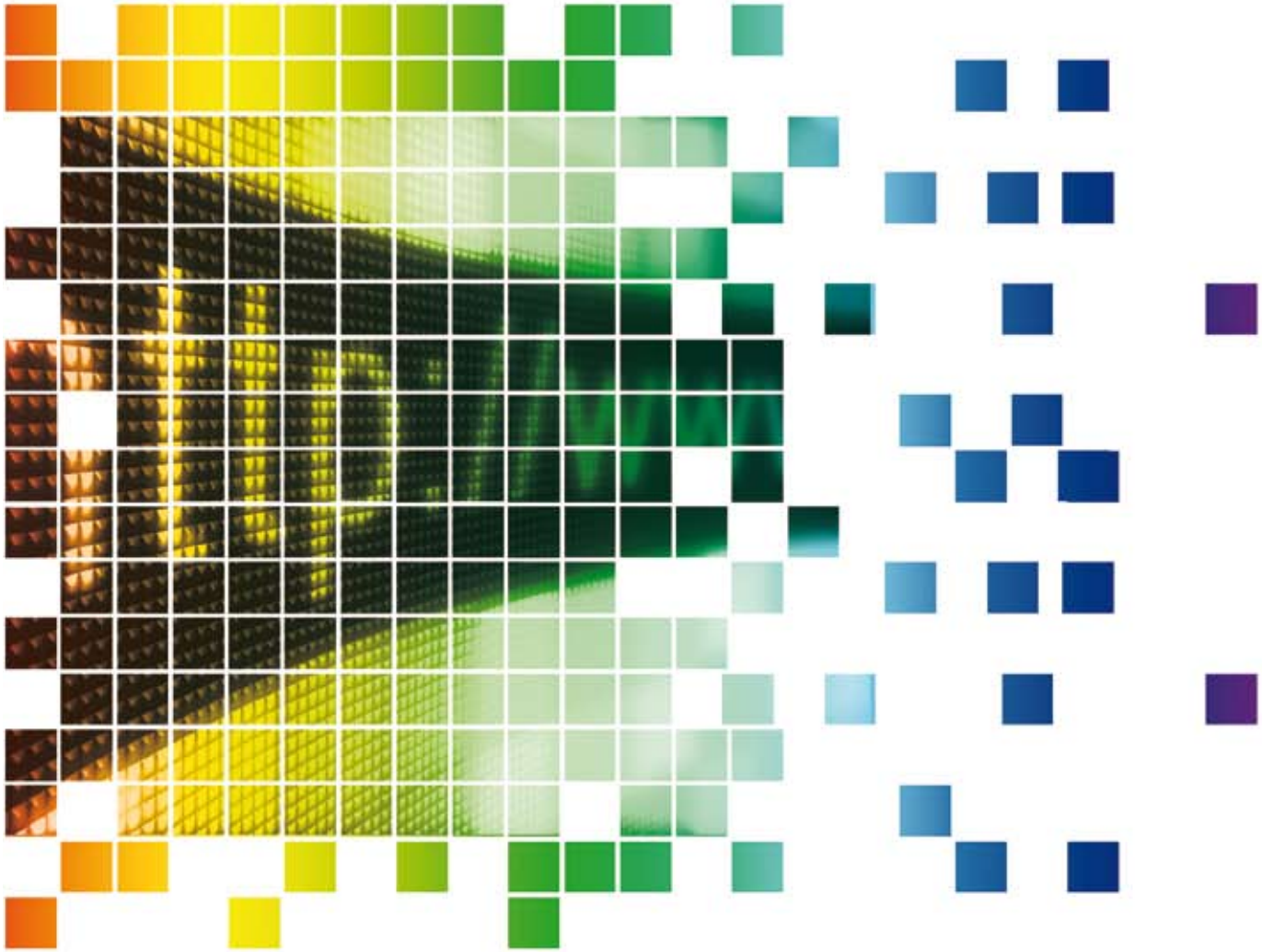
The fourth of four reports in the ESRC Seminar Series:

The educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain

Report of the seminar held on Monday 2 March 2009
The London School of Economics and Political Science

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

LSE THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE



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Introduction

Sonia Livingstone, The London School of Economics and Political Science

This is the fourth in a series of seminars, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, to examine 'The educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain'. Its purpose is to bring together academics, policy makers and practitioners from many different backgrounds in order to consider the contexts and consequences of use of new information and communication technologies for children and young people, with a particular focus on the implications on technological change on formal and informal education. The series is coordinated by John Coleman, Ingrid Lunt, Chris Davies and myself, together with guidance from our advisory board – Keri Facer, Neil Selwyn and Ros Sutherland.

Previous seminars

The first seminar scoped key theoretical frameworks, focusing on questions of age and development, on social approaches to technological change, and to diverse notions of learning. The report, titled 'Theorising the benefits of new technology for youth: Controversies of learning and development', can be freely downloaded from our website, as can those for subsequent seminars: www.education.ox.ac.uk/esrcseries/home/

Seminar 2 concerned questions of space: we were interested in learning environments, seeking to understand how changing spatio-technical arrangements are affecting the learning environment in the classroom, school, home and community. The report was titled 'Changing spaces: Young people, technology and learning'.

In the third seminar, titled 'Digital literacies: Tracing the implications for learners and learning', many of us here today gathered at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol to discuss the burgeoning debates over digital (or information-, cyber-, new media or other) literacies and competences that, supposedly, especially characterise today's generation of children and young people.

The series will conclude with a major one-day international conference on 14 July 2009 at the University of Oxford.

This seminar

Today's seminar is called 'Digital identities: Tracing the implications for learners and learning'. Those who have been following the previous seminars will know that identity has emerged as 'the answer' to many questions thus far. In relation to age and change, we examined the social, cultural and technological contexts that shaped children's interests, competences and identity, thereby shaping their approach to learning.

In relation to space, we meant to examine formal and informal spaces, but kept coming back to questions of motivation – are school spaces forbidding or unproductive because they constrain or exclude children's sense of who they are – and so would informal spaces allow them to be themselves more and so learn differently, perhaps better?

Digital literacy was also a theme that circled back to identity – in gaining new kinds of expertise, defined narrowly or broadly, approved or transgressive – children also negotiate the kinds of people they are, gaining (or losing) confidence in their ability, depending on official and peer evaluations of their digital activities and achievements.

But in homing in on the identity of the learner, we do not set ourselves an easy task today, and I'm delighted we have four expert speakers to guide us through some of the theoretical debates.

For a start, many would begin by pluralising identity – as multiple identities, some more valued than others, some more compatible than others, some more appropriate for learning contexts. Children do not leave their identities behind as they arrive at the school gate. And nor do their teachers and those who design the curriculum. But recognising diversity, avoiding inequality and building on life contexts has traditionally proved hard for schools.

Second, we must examine how the digital environment affords new opportunities and risks for the construction and management of identity:

- more anonymity but less privacy;
- more flexibility but less reflection perhaps;
- more support for niche dimensions of the self but less coherence, if that's our desire;
- more creativity but perhaps less recognition as online activities are lost in an abundance of voices; and so on.

Hence the argument that identities are increasingly dispersed, even fragmented, despite the wealth of opportunities and knowledge on offer.

Thirdly, we must figure out the relation between identity and learning – how certain activities, labelled education, entail commitments on the part of the actor to be a certain sort of person, and to be seen as such, judged as such by peers. Also crucial is the relation between identity and motivation, for what kids want to know, want to do, is a point we've kept coming back to – without motivation, technology offers nothing; yet technology is seen sometimes as a magic bullet to generate motivation where none was evident before. But people are motivated to act in accordance with their image of themselves, in order to achieve the goals they set themselves, in order to move from themselves as they are to themselves as they wish to be.

So, our focus today on identities in relation to learning in a digital environment should be both interesting and challenging.

What is identity? A sociological perspective

Mary Jane Kehily, Open University

Introduction: freedom, choice and identity in late modernity

This short paper is a loosely written account of the presentation given at the ESRC seminar series on new technologies and young people in the UK. Though far from comprehensive in its approach to identity, the paper identifies and discusses some generative ways of thinking about identity in late modernity. This is further explored with reference to two empirical examples drawn from the author's own work.

Late modern social theorists have developed a particular sociological perspective on selfhood in 'new times' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). A generally held assumption of late modernity suggests that identity matters more now because we have more choice. It could be argued that in previous generations we had identities waiting for us. The existence of strong class-based and regionally specific communities shaped the life trajectories of individuals. Within these locally bounded contexts individuals further developed a notion of being in the world through occupational structures and work-based cultures. By contrast late modern social worlds appear to offer fluidity, mobility and choice. Key articulations of contemporary selfhood found in phrases such as 'choice biographies' and the 'reflexive project of self' are redolent with ideas of plurality, selection and self-narrative – recurrent motifs of the post industrial story of self. Bauman (1988), however, provides a different conceptualisation of identity in late modernity:

> Everyone has to ask himself the question 'who am I, 'how should I live', 'who do I want to become' – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense freedom, is for the modern individual the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into the fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error… Self construction of the self is, so to speak, a necessity. Self confirmation of the self is an impossibility'. (Bauman 1988: 62)

Bauman reminds us that identity is forged in the social sphere and is located within temporal relations; a sense of the past, present and future haunts identity-work and identity practices. In asking the question, 'Who am I?' individuals are invited to set down identity markers located within the past and the present. 'Mother', 'lover', 'worker' – or whatever terms we reach for – work as both ascriptions and claims that account for the self in shorthand. 'How should I live?' points to the present, conjuring up the practices and routines that define ways of being in the world. The third question, 'Who do I want to become?' orientates us towards the future, tapping into the aspirational project of fashioning a future self. The inter-relationship between past, present and future in the on-going work of developing an identity suggests that who we are, what we do and what we become changes over the life course and furthermore, the work of identity remains fragile and unstable to the point where settlement is unachievable. Bauman powerfully suggests that developing an identity is a fate that modern individuals cannot escape; we need identity because without it we would go mad.

Processes of social recognition: language and belonging

While Bauman reminds us that identity is forged in the domain of the social, other theorists focus on the up-close, everyday social practices that shape a sense of self. The Bahktin circle of linguists working in 1930s Soviet Russia, emphasise the importance of the social in all forms of communication, producing active and generative forms of identity-work. Something as ordinary, everyday and ubiquitous as talking to others becomes central to defining oneself and one's

place in the world. For Volosinov (1973) language exists as a system of signs produced within a particular historical and social milieu. Volosinov sees language as a social phenomenon with very real material indices, where the sign becomes a production within communication. His analysis of the complex forms of human utterances place great emphasis on the social act of speaking and the social context of all communication. All speech acts, he argues, are addressed to another's word or another listener; even in the absence of another person, a speaker will assume the presence of an imagined listener. In this way language becomes the product of the reciprocal relationship between the speaker, the listener and their social world. In a much quoted passage, Volosinov writes:

> Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown down between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee… individualistic confidence in oneself, one's sense of personal value, is drawn not from within, not from the depths of one's personality, but from the outside world (Volosinov 1973: 86-89)

Volosinov's analysis of the social nature of language extends to areas that might otherwise be thought of as 'psychological'. He defines 'inner speech' as 'utterance still in the process of generation' (Volosinov 1973: 87) and argues that 'inner speech' is just as social in character and focus as its articulation through utterance. For Volosinov all forms of communication and experience are socially orientated and given meaning within a social context and the broader socio-ideological structure. Within this framework Volosinov identifies two poles: the 'I-experience', which tends towards extermination as it does not receive feedback from the social milieu; and the 'we-experience' which grows with consciousness and positive social recognition. What we may interpret as an individual's self-confidence, deriving from personal and psycho-social processes, Volosinov would interpret as an ideological form of the 'we-experience', deriving from confident social relations with the outside world, not from within. For Volosinov, an individual's identity, inner thoughts and outward articulations are reliant on processes of social recognition and ultimately the product of social inter-relations. Extrapolating from Volosinov's generative linguistic analysis, it is possible to suggest that identity is confirmed through processes of social recognition and challenged through processes of misrecognition. Identity formation from this perspective remains structured through the identification of processes of 'sameness and difference', inclusion and exclusion at work in the everyday interaction of talking to others. In everyday social encounters, speaking generates forms of identity work that become imbued with affect as individuals recognise and misrecognise 'people-like-us' and 'people-not-like-us'.

A commentary on identity can be found in the work of Stuart Hall. In a piece of work that blends different theoretical approaches to identity, Hall insightfully suggests that identity can be seen as the meeting place between the subjective processes inscribed in the way we live our lives and the discourses that position us:

‘Identity can be seen as the meeting place between the subjective processes inscribed in the way we live our lives and the discourses that position us’

> I use identity to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes, that produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or ‘chaining’ of the subject into the flow of discourse (Hall 1996).

In order to explore further the idea of identity as a meeting place, I will draw upon two empirical examples from my own research. The first example is based upon an ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in a secondary school in the UK (Kehily 2002), while the second example is based upon an on-going research project investigating motherhood as a changing identity (Thomson and Kehily 2008).

Identity as a meeting place

In an ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in school, conducted in the mid 1990s (Kehily 2002), I noted the striking continuities between my observations of informal student cultures and those of earlier school-based studies. Gender relations remained polarised in broadly familiar ways. Seemingly successful and secure masculine identities were premised upon being tough and not being gay, while feminine identities were largely premised on the notion of reputation as identified by Lees. Despite widespread changes in the national and global landscape marked by processes of de-industrialisation, globalisation and new social movements, informal student cultures could be characterised by a residual and persistent conservatism that appeared retrogressive and peculiarly out of kilter with ‘new times’ Working with the day-to-day expressions of sexism, homophobia and hyper-masculinity, I asked, why do student cultures remain so conservative? My conclusions led to an evolving understanding of the school context as a powerful site for defining the limits of gender identity for 13-15 year olds. For students, gender and sexuality remain important sites for the exercise of autonomy and agency within the confined space of the school – a space that they experienced as a total institution pre-eminently concerned with their incarceration and suppression of agency. Within the disempowering environment of education imperatives and external control, student sexual cultures become imbued with significance as adult-free and education-free zones where students can negotiate what is acceptable and desirable on their own terms (Kehily 2002). The collective activity of young people exists in tension with the individualising culture of contemporary education practice in ways that assert the power of the collective while challenging adult notions of sexuality as a preserve of adulthood. The overly traditional and retrogressive nature of student sexual cultures can also be seen as a protest against egalitarian structures, emergent sexualities and middle class sensibilities.

In the second example the identity of young mothers is brought into focus. An identifiable theme in Skeggs’ work is a concern with the negative associations surrounding working-class femininity. Femininity can be understood as a class-based property premised upon appearance – what you look like serves as shorthand for who you are, defining at a glance feminine identity, behaviour and morality. Skeggs (2004) argues that appearance operates as a condensed signifier of class in which negative value is attributed to working-class

forms of embodiment and adornment. Seen from this perspective, class exists as a process that works through evaluation, moral attribution and authorisation. Within the symbolic economy working-class women are commonly assumed to embody a style of feminine excess, denoting an overly abundant and unruly sexuality that places them dangerously close to the reviled figure of the prostitute. The fecundity of young working-class women, particularly, is viewed as excessive and morally reprehensible. Skeggs claims that the respectable/unrespectable binary that served to evaluate the working class in industrial times now works in different ways to construct certain vices as marketable and desirable while others retain no exchange value. Young working-class mothers provide a striking illustration of a group who's embodied vice is not recoupable for exchange. 'Even in the local context her reproductive use value is limited and limits her movements… white working-class women are yet again becoming the abject of the nation' (2004: 23). In contrast to theories of individualisation, Skeggs suggests that mobility exists as an unequal resource, offering different points of access to different social groups. In Skeggs' analysis mobility becomes a classed and gendered affair that confines working-class femininity to the local, offering little opportunity for movement.

Comedic excess is one of the ways in which class disgust is expressed – as in the Vicky Pollard and Kate Moss charity event. *Little Britain* excessive comic characters: the adult male who is still breast fed by his mother, the wheelchair bound male who is really able bodied, the teenage mum, Vicky Pollard embodies an aggressive caricature of working class femininity – drinking, shoplifting and fighting are strong features of her repertoire. Representations of young motherhood draw upon popular pathologies of young mothers as irresponsible, bad mothers, economically unproductive, excessive – informing an affective register generating a range of emotions from humour to disgust. At a time when the majority of women are delaying the birth of their first child until they are in their 30s or early 40s, women who have children in their teens appear aberrant and out-of-step. The age at which women become mothers reflects their socio-economic status as trends indicate that women who stay in full-time education, embark upon professional careers and exercise social mobility are more likely to postpone motherhood into middle age. Our study found that *all* women were invested in motherhood as a moment of profound identity change. The social polarisation of motherhood according to age points to age as the 'master category' through which normative notions of mothering are constituted. Our sample of 62 first time mothers could be subdivided into three age-based categories that shaped maternal identities and the project of new motherhood. In the 14-25 age group, women at the younger end were aware of the representational field that constructed them as inappropriate mothers. They accounted for their pregnancies in ways that spoke back to popular discourses positioning them as 'chav' girls and 'pram-face' moms. The middle group of women, age 25-35, tended to define the pregnancy as a synchronised biographical event; timing the baby to coincide with financial security, emotional security and the ability to take a career break without disadvantaging their general career prospects or ambitions. The older age group of 35-48 spoke of their pregnancy as a last gasp of fertility. Often beset by complicated fertility or relationship histories, they felt pleased and lucky to be pregnant at a time when they were on the point of 'giving up'.

'The collective activity of young people exists in tension with the individualising culture of contemporary education practice'

The experience of early motherhood

Our study points to the ways in which pregnancy constructs young mothers as simultaneously childlike and mature. Their accounts, in keeping with this contradictory positioning are replete with assertions of agency and denials of agency. Young women did not experience their pregnancy as a 'choice'. Rather, it was something that 'happened' and now had to be accommodated. Commonly, young women found themselves at the centre of familial dramas, their pregnancy acting as the trigger for family disputes and heated scenarios. Many young women felt that the common culture of motherhood as expressed in pregnancy magazines and other popular sources did not speak to them. Rather they drew upon soap operas and celebrity culture to make sense of their situation and the furore surrounding it. Most of the young mothers in our study remained in the family home or close to it and maintained close and regular contact with family members. Such intergenerational proximity could be associated with downward social mobility and the pooling of resources necessary to support the new mother and baby. The birth of the baby tended to be a family affair involving mothers, grandmothers, friends and partners.

Acutely aware of the ways in which their youth and their bump could be read by others, young women spoke back to popularly held constructions of early motherhood. Sophie, a 17 year old woman in our study, expresses an awareness of her pregnant body and the ways in which it may elicit moral disapproval:

> Some people cover up their bump and some people don't. I usually do but sometimes my tops do rise and that's when they get quite shocked 'cos my tummy's hanging out…

> What's the difference between having a baby now and having a baby when you're older? There's still the knowledge, you can't change the fact that you're gonna have a baby for the first time. No matter how old you are it's the same set of issues, you know sleepless nights, breast feeding, changing the baby and you're not gonna know any different because you're 17 or you're 30. Older people don't think like that. They judge you because you're young and having a baby… I love being pregnant. I absolutely love it. I'd go through it again and again.

Concluding points

In returning to the idea of identity as a meeting place it is possible to see identity as relational – formed and played out in relation to those who are similar and those who are different. Gender polarities in school fashion the identities of young women and men while also providing a context for the formulation of intra gender differences. In the second example, young mothers in the 14-19 age group can be seen as an identifiable cohort defined in relation to other, older mothers. Identity can be seen as multiple: spoken through and in dialogue with a range of social categories and positions. When focusing on young motherhood it is apparent that class is embedded within the age category and, in conjunction with the representational field, capable of mobilising economies of affect. Significantly, identity is contextually specific. In the ethnographic example, school exists as an institutional frame for gender/sexual identities. While in the second example, young motherhood is framed by the policy field, the representational and family/community values. The temporality of identity is commonly overlooked, however,

‘In school contexts, same sex friendship groups become a space for trying out different versions of masculinity/femininity’

it should be noted that identity is ever in-process and changes over the life course. In both examples it is possible to detect shifting emphases in relationships to past, present, future. Finally, identity is never complete and can incorporate aspirational and fantasy elements. In school contexts, same sex friendship groups become a space for trying out different versions of masculinity/femininity. The developing maternal identity of young women may become part of a biographical project of self, realising an emergent adult identity that is also part of an intergenerational story resonant with themes of social mobility, community and recuperation.

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Youth, identities and new technologies: A biographical perspective

Rachel Thomson, Open University

The Inventing Adulthoods study:

The Inventing Adulthoods Project is a qualitative longitudinal study of approximately 100 young people's lives, established in 1996 by a group of researchers that includes the author, Janet Holland, Sheila Henderson, Sue Sharpe and Sheena McGrellis. At the start of the study the young people were aged between 11 and 16, in 2006 they are aged between 21 and 26. Over the course of the research they have grown up in five contrasting sites of the UK: a leafy home-counties commuter belt town, an inner city site, a deprived estate in the North West, an isolated rural village, and a city in Northern Ireland[1]. Over the years we have used a range of research methods including focus groups, diaries, lifelines and questionnaires, but at the heart of the study are repeat individual interviews of roughly 100 young people that have carried out roughly on an annual basis over a ten year period. The study did not set out to focus on the place of ICT in young people's lives, but these data were collected as an incidental part of documenting young people's biographies, and constitutes a record of a rapidly changing historical period and how this coincides with the adolescence of a generation. This paper is drawn from the book that summarises the study published in 2007 (Henderson et al. 2007), focusing on the place of sociality in young people's lives and the ways in which this was mediated by new technologies (see also Henderson et al. 2002).

The digital revolution

When the first of the three component studies of Inventing Adulthoods began in 1996, over five million people in the UK owned a mobile phone and while this figure rose to almost seven million in 1997 (Crabtree et al. 2003), the youth market had yet to take off. By early 2005, the Mobile Data Association suggested that for the first time there were more mobile phones in Britain than people (60 million, up from 55 million in autumn 2004) (Thomson 2005); with eight out of ten adults owning mobiles; 90 per cent of secondary school children; and as many as one in four under-10s. Household mobile phone ownership was highest in the South East (77 per cent) and lowest in Northern Ireland (51 per cent) (EFSFS 2004). Internet access was also on the rise and by the end of 2004, 52 per cent of UK households (12.6 million) could access the internet from home (compared with 9 per cent – 2.2 million – in 1998 (ONS). An initial 'digital divide', involving lower access to the internet and other new technologies among low income households, narrowed as the century turned (White 1999).

We first began asking about ICT use in general in May-October 1999. Coincidentally, this turned out to encompass a transitional moment in the history of UK mobile phone culture. Ownership doubled between January 1999 and the end of 2000 (Stoble 2000), leaping from nearly 15 million, to over 30 million. By November 2000, 54 per cent of UK adults and 75 per cent of 15-24 year olds owned their own mobile phone. This was followed by the heralding a 'text message explosion' in early 2002 and by the summer of 2003, 'six million text-crazy children' formed part of a British market involving over 50 million mobile phones (MDA 2003). 96 per cent of 15 to 24 year olds owned a mobile by this stage, with many preferring to text rather than speak, feeling isolated/deprived if they were unable to use their mobile phones or access the internet, and regarding making and receiving calls as a sign of popularity.

Mobile phone ownership among young people in the study tended to reflect these trends. Very few young people had access to either mobile phones or the Internet in 1999 but, two interview rounds later in 2001, ownership had increased significantly. Christmas 1999 and 2000

[1]The young people have been followed through three linked studies: (1) Youth Values: A study of identity, diversity and social change, funded by the ESRC as part of the *Children 5-16 programme: Growing up in the 21st century* (L129251020); (2) Inventing Adulthoods: Young people's strategies for transition, also funded by the ESRC on their research programme *Youth Citizenship and Social Change* (L134251008); and (3) Youth Transitions funded as part of the *Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group* at South Bank University. The data from the study is currently being archived and will be made available for secondary analysis. Further information on the study is available from www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods

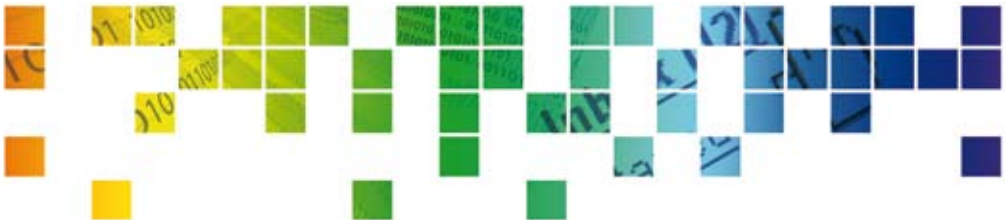
‘Mobile telephones are embedded in local social practices as commodities within a material economy and as a medium for the generation and exchange of social capital’

both saw particular surges in mobile phone ownership and SMS (short message service) ‘texting’ became an established part of the young people’s everyday cultures at this point. Access to the Internet at home also increased at this stage (often as a consequence of the cheap internet access provided by cable companies) but took much longer to become widespread. This rapid development of mobile phone culture was uneven, with notable variation according to locality. Ownership in the predominantly working class inner city and Northern Irish sites was proportionately higher in 1999 but, by 2000, mobiles were just as popular among the working class young people in the disadvantaged estate. By 2001, a majority of young people in these three sites owned a mobile phone. In contrast, things developed more slowly outside the city and 2001 still saw ownership at only half of young people in the more middle class commuter belt town and the rural village (notably our more affluent research sites on the whole).
By 2005, almost all of the young people in the study had mobile phones, most had email accounts and several had their own web pages. The digital generation had arrived.

Mobiles, emails and telephones: doing sociality

Keeping in touch with friends, family and colleagues has grown in significance in an increasingly individualised late modern life, where a progressive freeing of individual agency from social structure demands that individuals must be active and creative in securing class and gender privileges (Bauman 2001, Hey 2005). In this context, commentators have viewed such activities as practices of ‘sociality’. These involve the choice, rather than assignment, of reflexive social ties and networks that need to be ‘established, maintained and constantly renewed by individuals’ (Beck 1992: 97). They also help to secure social capital, that is, resources based on connections and group membership (Bourdieu 1986). However, different forms of social capital have different outcomes: bonding social capital ties young people into closed social networks and bridging social capital enables them to move beyond existing networks, accessing new people and opportunities. Here we are interested in young people’s ongoing active engagement in practices of ‘sociality’, particularly in exploring how the acquisition and use of ICTs provides a window into this work and the ‘emergent accomplishments’ that it secures (Bauman 2001).

By virtue of their place in the life course and as part of the digital generation, the young people in our study were arguably in the vanguard of these changes and, as such, acutely aware of the need to realise opportunities for personal improvement and development (Catan et al. 1996). For them, keeping ‘in touch’ was part of a dynamic process of constructing a social identity as they grew up. On a day to day level, friendships and membership of social groups required varying degrees of emotional, social and even cultural labour. Of course, much of this work took place in school, the college cafeteria and for some, on the street, without any help from communication technologies. This was particularly the case for those living in physically bounded communities with friends in close proximity: hanging out on the street and ‘popping round’ was still the most common and cheap method of keeping in touch outside school. Early in the study, two key ways in which mobile telephones were embedded in local social practices became clear: as *commodities* within a material economy; and as a *medium* for the generation and exchange of social capital. As time and the technologies progressed, we began to see how these initial patterns changed and to understand the different ways in which the mobile phone operated; as a technology for managing social groups and networks when young people left school; for conducting their intimate relationships; and for parenting.



Fashions and fads: ICTs and material culture

Differences in the currency and meaning of mobile phones were stark in the early part of the study and these were linked to locality, class and, to a lesser extent, gender. In Northern Ireland and the deprived estate – both predominantly working class landscapes with relatively high levels of social deprivation, unemployment and a discernible culture of violence, where youthful 'hanging around' on the streets and extended family networks were the norm – they were largely discussed in terms of material culture. At this time, the increased visibility and audible presence of telephones was forcing schools to create regulations about their appropriate use, and young people reported rules such as no phones in school, or the classroom. Just like other items of material worth, telephones became a target for intimidation and petty crime.

In the Northern estate, mobile phones were largely taken up as another 'label' in a context of conspicuous consumption where not wearing the 'right' type of sportswear, bag or coat was punishable by being 'called' – a form of public humiliation that involved acquiring a reputation for the particular transgression, eg, being poor, being sexually promiscuous etc. Thus phones constituted one more aspect of material one-upmanship that characterised both private and public young life. Changing phones was a frequent occurrence here and young men, in particular, displayed a detailed knowledge of, and interest in the various deals available for financing the phones as well as the latest technological and design developments. Whilst mobile phones were still predominantly viewed as a transitory fashion accessory among young people from more deprived communities in Northern Ireland, the currency of designer labels was less extreme in a landscape where consumer culture and a lively nightlife vied with sectarianism in the shaping of competitive peer social relations. Here, mobile phones were largely seen as being for 'rich kids'. Young men were more engaged in this process of social change: whilst Lucy reported that, 'They're really in at the minute' and Corinne apologised for not 'being up to date', young men were more likely to be proud owners. Patrick, for example, explained that, 'You wouldn't get phoning in school, you'd just bring them in for show, sit them on your belts or something'.

As the study progressed, the ownership of mobile phones became normalised and their role of status symbol slipped away from young people's discussions. Even maintaining the 'advantage' of having an up to date telephone became more complex, as suggested by Luu's discussion of how she used her international family contacts to keep up to date:

> My Mum's friend goes to sort of America and he sort of every month and he gets new stock from there and sort of sends it back, changes the chip, and then sells it. [..] Otherwise people can't keep up – people like me can't keep up with people changing their mobiles all the time, it's quite hard sometimes. (Luu, 18, 2002)

Phones as a medium for social capital

In the affluent, 'media rich' commuter belt, mobile phones arrived slightly later and meant something very different from the start. Here, moving into further education at 16 years was mediated by the parallel emergence of a pub culture and a lifestyle that reflected more closely the picture painted by other research where 'mobility and flexible scheduling are central' (Gillard et al. 1996). Young people were more likely to have access to a computer and to email in their own or a friend's home. They were also far more self conscious and anxious about making the right friends and contacts

'Within accounts of ICT use, we can discern the 'offensive' sociality of the privileged and the 'defensive' sociality of the disadvantaged'

at school. This, combined with their greater economic and cultural capital, gave rise to a particular mobile phone culture involving the 'micro organisation' of social activities (Ling 2000) and a 'bulimic' use of the telephone (Manceron (1997: 80) – characteristics of the 'offensive' sociality of the new middle class (Hey, 2005). For these young people, dotted across a landscape of commuter villages, mobile phones, like the car before them, transcended the boundaries of geographical distance and facilitated the maintenance of social capital. Not having a mobile phone rapidly became a means of exclusion from the new forms of sociality it facilitated.

Leaving school and university: A critical moment in sociality

The transition from school to further/higher education or work represents a critical moment in the maintenance or transformation of young people's social networks. Other (less universal) critical moments occur when young people leave home for university, and when they leave university itself. Although some young people had phones while still at school during the research period, leaving school was a key moment for acquiring one. Ownership in all sites increased as young people became more independent and mobile and, as a result, more difficult for their families and friends to contact them.

Previous differences in the place and meaning of mobile phones in young people's lives continued at this time In Northern Ireland and the deprived estate, friendship groups fragmented as the majority got jobs or went on to FE colleges. Una from Northern Ireland echoed other young people in these locations when she said of her school friends: 'I've lost all touch with them and they only live beside me'. Although they recognised that it was necessary to adopt positive strategies for keeping in touch by making an effort to phone, in practice this rarely happened:

> At the start and all we would be like, you know, trying to whatever, call for each other, go out at the weekends or whatever, but then I would be working and then when I'm off work she would be working. (Una, 17, 1999)

In the Northern estate, Justin went to college and lost touch with many of his friends from school who did not. Some of them joined the army or moved away:

> The brunt of 'em live round Stokehill area and it's like a bit of a hike to go down so I've lost contact with a lot of 'em. (Justin, 17, 1999)

This break-up of old networks was rarely defined as traumatic. Indeed many of these young people welcomed the opportunity to make more mature or relevant friendships with the people they met at college or work. Una, for example, made a new group of friends at college and several of them had jobs in the same bar. Significantly they 'all got ourselves mobile phones so we send each other messages'. For her, friends had been shed and owning a mobile was a symbol of the process of transition to a new form of sociality and identity. However, there was a great sense of loss for others. Karin, for example, from Northern Ireland, was very sad when she was unable to keep a relationship alive with her best school friend Anna, who she 'always wanted to stay really good friends with':

> I was sending 'Happy Halloween' messages to everyone. And I sent one to her and she phoned me and goes, 'Who's this? Oh it's Karin. Happy Halloween'. And she goes, 'Oh right, I didn't know it was you, cause I've taken your phone number off my phone'. And I cried that night. (Karin, 17, 2001)

Karin might have been happier in the commuter belt, where keeping in touch with friends from school was so important that

Suzanne, for example, talked about a friend who found a job instead of going into the sixth form and now phoned her up 'every other night' in an attempt to maintain contact with his old friendship groups:

> You kinda get the feeling that he's quite insecure and scared of losing touch with everyone because, you know, we're sort of the only friends he's got cause he's you know working all the time so, if he loses contact with us then it's gonna be hard for him to meet people his age. (Suzanne, 17, 1999)

The currency of educational networks and of using ICTs to maintain them was so strong that Edward and his friends from middle school continued to keep in contact by phone and email and, in the days before 'Friends Reunited' became a popular website, planned to set up a website for everyone to keep in touch. This currency continued into and beyond the university years, as young people from this site maintained contact with new friends as well as old friends attending universities elsewhere. Even if this was not acted upon, the ability to get in touch with old friends if necessary appeared to provide a sense of security for young people like Reuben stepping into the unknown environment of university and a new 'home':

> I think we will keep in touch, or at least try to, 'cos it's quite easy with email, etc. Um, a lot of my friends are computer literate as well, so it's not a difficulty to keep in touch by email. And they will all be taking their computers with them, most likely. Um, but yeah I mean I don't know whether they'll be coming back or not – I don't know whether I'll be coming back or not. (Reuben, 18, 2002)

ICTs were an important way of keeping in touch with family for several of the more middle class young people as they left home and moved into university halls of residence. Paul's parents had set up a chat room 'so that we can meet at a certain time each day, or whenever'. Things were more complicated for Donal and his rather less media literate parents:

> I would talk to them by text so I text my sister as well but my mum hasn't worked out how to read texts yet so she phoned me up and says 'Are you at the bus station?'. I said 'No that was about three weeks ago'. (Donal, 26, 2002)

Sociality can be understood as reflecting class and cultural practices and within the accounts of ICT use described above we can discern the 'offensive' sociality of the privileged and the 'defensive' sociality of the disadvantaged (Hey 2005, 868). Yet individual biographies suggest that it is also possible to see ICTs as being deployed actively as mechanisms in the construction of identities, often against the grain of existing tradition and local or family expectation. In the next section, we explore the ways in which the gendered boundaries between private and public domains are negotiated in the communicative practices made possible by mobile telephones.

Mediating the gendered boundaries between the public and the private

> A computer can open a bedroom to the public and media can make the public sphere more private. A personal stereo on the bus effectively cuts off the outside world while the choice of a ghetto blaster in the same situation is a rather more expressive way either to privatise the bus trip or make one's private taste public'. (Reimer 1995: 64)

Traditionally, the public/private divide has played a structural role in the mediation of youth and adult identities (Fornas and Bolin

‘The role of the mobile phone in liberating young people from the hierarchy of the domestic sphere extends well beyond parental control’

1995, Thompson 1990, Habermas 1989). Adult status has been defined by entry into public institutions and roles – such as worker, marriage and political citizenship. With the extension and fragmentation of the different strands of the transition there is no longer a clear sense of movement from the private to the public in the process of becoming an adult (Jones and Bell, 2000). ICTs have had a role to play in this increasing uncoupling of physical and social spheres in providing a ‘create your own private and public spheres’ situation. Bedrooms can no longer be understood as the epitome of the private, being wired to global networks (Silverstone op. cit.) and constructed as ‘chill out zones’ (Lincoln 2000). Meanwhile, whilst young women may be moving out of the bedroom, technologies such as the internet and mixing decks have drawn young men back in (Henderson 1997, MacNamee 1998).

We found a number of instances where the mobile phone or the Internet helped those who felt ‘trapped’ in private space to extend their social worlds. For example, Graham and Neville’s physical impairments limited their ability to be ‘out and about’ but they were able to keep in touch with the world in ways that would not have previously been possible. In Jasmine’s case, the mobile phone played a crucial role in enabling her to escape the heavy surveillance of the domestic sphere and, in so doing, to subvert the operation of a particular set of gendered power relations. Although considered ‘private’ in the adult world, this sphere offered her little privacy. As the only daughter of a British/Turkish family, she had suffered the protective surveillance of brother, father and mother and, when we first met her aged 16 years, was relatively restricted in her ability to socialise in comparison with her friends. Despite his previous role as guardian, it was her brother who gave her the mobile phone that transformed her social life by allowing her to talk privately with girlfriends and boyfriends, away from the watchful eyes of her parents. She received her own telephone calls from her newly acquired boyfriend: ‘well because he can’t ring my house that’s one of the reasons why I’ve got to have one’ and opted for a pay-as-you-go phone for obvious reasons: ‘I don’t get like the bills. No numbers (.) or anything’.

ICTs as technologies of intimacy

Jasmine’s case was just one of many examples of the ways in which ICTs secured some privacy in young people’s intimate relationships and provided a space for forging a sexual identity. It was the internet for example that facilitated the ‘coming out’ process for young lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the study. When he was 17, for instance, Mal’s first ‘secret’ boyfriend moved away from his neighbourhood, leaving him feeling isolated and depressed. Initially, he described retreating to his bedroom and avoiding phone calls from his local friends but in time this isolation eventually led him to look beyond the limits of his local community to the possibility of finding more meaningful friendships at a global level. He discovered a whole new set of relationships by going to an internet cafe and visiting online gay chat rooms. Ironically, Mal met someone in a chat room who happened to be sitting next to him in the internet cafe. They became friends and a short while later both came out on the gay scene in their city.

The relationship between cyberspace and offline social and sexual practices was described in detail by other young gay men. Donal, for example, became ‘addicted’ to the gay dating website ‘Gaydar’ after a long term relationship broke up:

> You meet anyone now, like the first question they ask you, ‘What’s your Gaydar profile?’[..] Like um ‘cos you – on the Gaydar you have a – you get a profile and you put on your picture, and all your likes and dislikes, and

> what you're into and what you're not into, and your age, and that carry on you know. [..] Everyone's got them like, do you know what I mean, you have to have a Gaydar profile (laughs. and actually my friend just broke up with a boyfriend there, and he come round to my er place during the week, and um we set him up a Gaydar profile, you know, he didn't have one. And like it was so weird, (laughs) you know, it was like, 'Ooh this is what you do when you're single, like (laughs) go on Gaydar. (Donal, 28, 2004)

In reworking the boundaries between the public and the private, these technologies created opportunities for new kinds of intimacy but also for new kinds of transgression and risk. This first became obvious from young gay men's accounts. These constructed a form of erotic sociality that appeared to be a key 'gay skill' to be acquired in the process of 'coming out', one in which the sexualised and potentially dangerous nature of the contact intertwined.

If the internet was an important resource for forging gay sexualities and communities early on in the study, the mobile phone increasingly had a role to play in mediating a much wider range of intimate relationships. By the interview rounds in 2000 and 2001, mobile phones and 'texting' were an integral part of youth culture and of romantic and friendship cultures. Mal, for example, went on to 'meet' a boyfriend in another city via the internet and maintained this relationship by mobile phone. For young people not yet engaging in sexual relationships, the phone and text messaging offered a medium for flirting. At her first interview, Monique described 'chatting' as a central part of her social life and relationships, a practice with its own unwritten rules of engagement. Giving one's land line telephone number to a boy, for example, was a relatively serious gesture. For this to be given away by another could be seen as a betrayal.

> I ain't gonna give out somebody's phone number, if it ain't – if I don't even talk to them, to be giving it. She's giving out my phone number, even though it's Ryan's, I mean me and Ryan's tight. It ain't a big thing for Ryan to have my number, but I'd rather give it to him myself. (Monique, 17, 1999)

At her second interview Monique talked about the exchange of voice and text messages as a medium for making and breaking relationships. When asked in the interview if she was still seeing her boyfriend she demonstrated the breakdown of the relationship by phoning him there and then – 'watch if I don't phone him and he don't answer', 'he'll put me to voice mail'. He did. By her fourth interview Monique had become highly proficient at dating online:

> Monique: *Some boy just emailed me his picture. Yeah I can work with that, yes, yes. And there's another guy that I met on the Internet the other day like, I was meant to meet him, but he's 21 – no is he 21? – I don't know how old this one is, I haven't bothered – I haven't spoken to this one on the phone yet.*
>
> Interviewer: *Is he an Internet kind of friend, or someone you know anyway?*
>
> Monique: *No all these people are just people that I've met off the Internet.*
>
> Interviewer: *(laughs) Oh right.*
>
> Monique: *Save – I'm going to save this picture. He won't tell me his name.*
>
> (Monique, 20, 2002)

There has been relentless media coverage of new forms of bullying that have grown up around the use of mobile telephones by young people, including the practice of 'happy slapping' where the humiliation of a physical attack is sealed by a photograph that is taken on and then circulated by

‘Young people are at the centre of networks of information, in which public and private boundaries are fluid and in which intimacy, eroticism and the potential for transgression abound’

telephone. More mundanely Karin told us about how she was excluded from a friendship group as a result of a series of slanderous email messages and texts, that appeared to have come from her own telephone and which had been sent to her own address book. In externalising the intimate in the form of a mobile phone address book or an email account, ICTs also pose the danger of losing control of the intimate and of the social invading the personal.

The telephone as a technology of parenting

In an exploration of the ‘coining of new forms of social interaction’ arising from the use of mobile telephones among Norwegian youth, Rich Ling observes that the telephone, like all symbolic relics is open to multiple interpretations. ‘While some see it as a way to mark their departure from the home, others use it symbolically to integrate themselves further with their parents’ (2000: 108). Moreover, parents themselves play an active role in inventing these new forms of interaction, ‘trying to reassert their control’.

In our study, we found a number of examples of how the ownership of a mobile phone gave parents access to arenas of young people’s lives that would formerly not have been available to them. Una provided a graphic example of how the mobile phone enables a transcendence of social and physical space, when she described her mother calling her at her new job as a podium dancer in a local bar. If she was late home, her mother phoned to find out if she was all right and she answered ‘but sure you knew I was all right because I answered the phone!’. Safety was an enduring theme among young women.

Resistance to having a mobile phone could be related to anti-consumerism but we also found a variety of ways in which mobile phones were implicated in strategies for resisting parental control. One obvious advantage to taking responsibility for the cost of a mobile phone involved by-passing parental restrictions on the use of landlines. Landline bills were one of the focal points of conflict with parents reported in the study. Their itemisation was a key parental tool not only for making young people accountable for the cost of their calls but also for scrutinising who they called. For example, Su’s parents took the step of switching their landline contract to incoming calls only, while Heather reported her father’s rule of ‘ten minutes per day, per person’. Ruth, meanwhile, was banned from using the family landline when the bill was inflated by the cost of her calls to friends’ mobiles.

The role of the mobile phone in liberating young people from the hierarchy of the domestic sphere extended well beyond this area of parental control. It was, for instance, useful in helping them to negotiate the complications of a reconstituted family, allowing them to bypass parental authority and gain control over contact and access. Market research has found that young people whose parents have split up were much more likely to own a mobile phone (Duff, 2000). At her second interview, Monique, for example, talked about her father making contact with her again after a period of estrangement linked to his reluctance to come to the house (as he and her mother were not on speaking terms). Her acquisition of a mobile was central to facilitating this contact. Once he had her mobile number, he would ‘ring my phone, ‘Monique, I’m outside, come’.

Accounts of the mobile phone’s role in liberating young people from the new forms of parental surveillance it facilitated were limited to young men. At 16, Luke explained that having a phone was ‘a bit of a curse with

my mother and father – they can always get you wherever you are'. By the next interview, Luke had got rid of his phone, explaining that 'people can get to you too easily'. Sixteen year old Paul had learned to screen his calls. He explained that his mother only phoned him on his mobile if he had done something wrong. So, when he saw she was calling him he simply turned his phone to voicemail, then listened to her message.

By the fourth round of interviewing (2002-04) we still found young men resisting the demand to be 'reached' by friends and family. Working class young men such as Luke, Paul and others came to rely again on their phones when they made the transition from school to work. One strategy for resisting surveillance was to juggle different phones. Allan reported having loads of different phones for a range of different reasons – different people, different numbers, different deals. Luke overcame his resistance to owning a mobile when he started working in the building trade. His phone became the key to his working life, a means of receiving information about jobs and for storing work related contacts. When we last spoke to him he was planning on giving the mobile and all the contacts stored on it to his brother when he travelled abroad.

The individual as the centre of communicative practice

Over the ten year period of the Inventing Adulthood study, young people were initially able to drop the mobile phone from their social worlds and to employ alternative practices of sociability, we have seen how they gradually became more dependent on this personal technology over time. By the fourth round (2002-04), Amanda described herself as having 'an unhealthy obsession with text messaging'; Donal feared he was 'addicted to the internet'; and Judy felt she would 'die without my mobile' having stored all her friends' contact details there and there alone.

As they emerged, ICT cultures were associated with particular forms of sociality, transitional moments and communities. The changes they facilitated were mediated by the particularities of localities and practices of sociality that were embedded in local cultures, shaped by class, geography and temporality. The specific conditions of these young people's lives lead them to realise the potential of ICTs in particular ways: as a means of 'buying' forms of privacy and independence from parental control; of accessing new social networks; and, of positioning themselves within social hierarchies. Viewing the use of ICTs within the context of particular projects of self, allows us to see how the mobile phone, messaging and the internet together facilitate a reworking of public and private boundaries, as the individual becomes the centre of a network of communicative practices, easily accessed and able to access others. For some young women, this offered a range of new possibilities to move beyond the confines of the domestic sphere. In different ways and for different reasons, Jasmine, Monique and Sandy all exploited the potential of their mobile telephones to claim greater personal and sexual freedom in a movement from the domestic to more public spheres. Similarly, Mal, Donal and others used the internet to expand their social worlds and forge a gay sexuality and identity. The sense of reassurance that parents gained from being able to contact their daughters out and about at work and play may also have enhanced this freedom. In sharp contrast, young men like Luke and Paul initially utilised their mobiles to protect themselves from the reciprocal responsibilities to their parents that were opened up by the technology, later realising their potential as a medium for storing and trading the information that is the key to the working life of a modern skilled manual worker. While the phone may provide one with the freedom to contact others it also makes others free to contact you, for some this may be experienced as a loss (Zadvorny and Bond 2005).

Conclusion

The relationship between changing technologies and social practices is iterative. Individuals and families use ICTs in order to fulfil the demands of existing relationships and obligations. In that sense they are simply tools for existing jobs. Yet in facilitating new forms of communication they also make new things possible, whether that is 'elastic parenting', 'happy slapping' or the shorthand logic of 'Gaydar profiling'. In focusing on this particularly dynamic aspect of the Inventing Adulthoods study we hope to have shown some of the ways in which different temporalities intersect: the fast changes of ICT development and emergence of different forms of 'mobile manners' (Crawford et al. 2003); the way in which a particular generation progress through their teens and into their twenties and make these technologies their own; and slower historical changes that take place over generations and which are described by the late modern theories of 'individualisation' and 'detraditionalisation'. Mobile technologies have been recognised as important ways in which to contact young people and are being exploited by commercial companies and the public sector alike. Certainly, the lens of ICTs provides a way of seeing young people at the centre of networks of information, in which public and private boundaries are fluid and in which intimacy, eroticism and the potential for transgression abound.

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Discussion from the floor

The task of the adolescent, as traditionally conceived, is to make the move from the private to the public sphere. Arguably, this analysis must now be rethought as the public/private boundary is blurring or being reconfigured, with private activities occurring in public and vice versa. Arguably too we are all – adults also – adolescents now, preoccupied with identity issues and with securing such privileges of class and/or gender as we can manage. Or, perhaps, public/private boundaries are not eroding so much as altering their meaning or shifting elsewhere, opening up new spaces for social activity, new safe spaces enabled by technology.

How are children themselves involved in Thomson's research? More as research partners than as objects of research, though in a long-term project running over the ten years, the researchers have to lead and sustain the project. The researchers remained in consultation with respondents, and made a film of the study to feed back the findings.

How do identities enabled by technology or by institutions relate to each other, given that the same people are involved – as users and as participants?

Education, identity and the possibility of democratic public space in schools

Michael Fielding, Institute of Education, University of London

I want to explore three main arenas of advocacy in connection with identity and democracy in schools.

These are, firstly, the argument that public space is a key site, both of individual identity and of democratic ways of living and learning together, and that because of its pre-eminent existential and political importance in human flourishing it deserves considerably more attention than it has been accorded, either in theory or in practice, in schools within public systems of education in our society.

Second, I want to suggest that certain kinds of inclusive public space – in particular, the practice of general or whole School Meetings of the kind exemplified in radical traditions of private and state education – are worthy of further study and development. In seeking to make such a case I will suggest that in order to achieve the emancipatory potential to which such public spaces aspire we need to attend with care to a plurality of shared, subaltern/minority spaces within which identities, dispositions and capacities can be negotiated, nurtured and realised.

Thirdly, in coming to understand the importance of developing inclusive public spaces like general or whole School Meetings, we can begin to develop a number of markers that have the potential to contribute towards a more comprehensive intellectual framework for radical practice that helps us not only realise and reject the distressing superficiality which attends the ahistorical myopia that dominates much contemporary and futures-oriented thinking. A framework which foregrounds what I am tentatively calling 'spaces for restless encounter' can also help us map and develop practices and purposes at multiple different levels of institutional life that enable us 're-see' each other and ourselves. In so doing we attend to the deep requirements of radical democracy in which the abstract principles of freedom, equality and community become real through the shared responsibility of helping each other to lead good lives in a just and caring society.

On the importance of public space

In championing public space as a key site, both of individual identity and of democratic renewal, one useful and creative tradition of thought and praxis is the republican tradition of democracy recently explored in Stuart White's contribution (White 2008) to his co-authored book with Daniel Leighton. White argues for six key elements, which, in contrast to representative or elitist theories of democracy, emphasise the importance of the public good; of an inclusive popular involvement in decision-making; of appropriate deliberation in that process; of the necessity of each person being free to make authentic judgements unintimidated by dominant others, of economic egalitarianism and, most important of all, of participation in collective decision-making in public-spirited action.

John Dewey's writing on democracy and education also privileges a wide-ranging commitment to shared ways of living and learning together in which, I suggest, public space has an important role to play. For Dewey, 'democracy is more than a form of government: it is primarily a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey 1916: 87) and, for me, part of that 'mode of associated living' inevitably involves the nurturing of a vibrant pubic realm in schools, ie, public space where staff and students can reflect on and make meaning of their work together and agree shared commitments to further developing the ideals and practices of life and learning to which the school aspires.

‘Public space is a key site both of individual identity and of democratic ways of living and learning together’

Some of the key theoretical arguments for the importance of public space go well beyond the case for democratic participation and suggest that it has a crucial role to play in our development as persons, not just as citizens. Within the field of education, one of the most eloquent and persuasive contemporary writers within this tradition is Maxine Greene. Often inspired by the work of the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, she argues for what I call (i) the presumption of agency, ie, the development of individual identity through acting with others; (ii) communal contexts of identity formation, ie, each person’s uniqueness being a function of togetherness, of being participant; and (iii) inclusive solidarity, ie, people perceiving what is common from different positions and against different backgrounds.

Within the field of educational leadership and management for democracy Philip Woods argues strongly for space as a key orienting concept. Broadly speaking, he suggests that firm democratic structures within a school must be complemented by ‘free spaces’ that minimise assumptions of hierarchy and knowledge. Free space can be found in what he calls ‘independent zones’, two examples being (for students) playtime and peer mediation and (for staff) team working scenarios and shared leadership opportunities. Whilst not explicitly naming inclusive public space between students and staff, he does advocate the development of what he calls ‘blurred status zones’, eg, informal daily encounters and student councils, where there is at least an ambivalence if not a equity, of status within intergenerational encounters.

Interestingly, in the last couple of decades some of the strongest challenges to notions of public space have come from the Left. Within political theory writers like Nancy Fraser have critiqued Habermasian accounts of the public sphere by pointing out, firstly, that historically situated understandings reveal important exclusions from dominant sites of public space. Secondly, they point to the key role of what she calls ‘subaltern publics’ within which excluded or minority members of society develop dispositions, identities and capacities which enable solidary forms of encounter and, should they wish it, a more confident and challenging entry into hegemonic pubic spaces which, in practice if not intention, remain persistently exclusive in terms of both process and outcome. Thirdly, and as a cautionary aside to overly inward approaches to the creation of ‘counter publics’, Fraser reminds us of the dangers and challenges of creating separatist enclaves without the dispositions or capacities to engage with dominant publics and the wider social and political contexts which frame present realities and future possibilities.

Within the field of education, one of the most insightful and powerful writers who has taken forward the work of people like Maxine Greene, Hannah Arendt and Nancy Fraser is Aaron Schutz. Formerly one of the very few strong advocates of public space in schools, Schutz is now sceptical, not of its desirability, but of our capacity to create spaces within which subaltern publics can negotiate and transform the pathways of power and so lead to genuinely democratic engagement and action. In his more recent writing Schutz argues that the ‘challenge of ‘difference’ means we must… acknowledge the effects of power and oppression on individuals’ ability to participate in even the smallest of communities.… The creation of a single common public space may be fundamentally oppressive to those groups’ (Schutz 2001: 294).

‘Despite its dangers and limitations I do not want to give up on the possibility of inclusive public space – for example, the whole school meeting’

In some of my recent work I have been trying to explore the lived realities, as well as the theoretical resonance, of these concerns. Certainly, we need to ask (a) How can schools co-create, especially with disadvantaged young people, a range of spaces where they can develop their own identities and capacities? (b) How can we find out more about whether some safe spaces unwittingly foster dependency and others are more able to bridge to other groups and wider ‘public’ spaces, cultures and practices in schools? (c) How do we help dominant assumptions, cultures and practices within schools to be more open to alternative perspectives and understandings? (d) How might we create circumstances, occasions and ongoing practices that help individuals and groups to re-see each other?

Certain kinds of public space and the subaltern practices we need to make them vibrant and inclusive, can form part of a response to these questions, just as they can to Nick Stevenson’s companion insistence that ‘In our short-term and disposable society there need to be spaces where young people can discuss what it means to live a good and meaningful life and the kinds of people they wish to become.’ (Stevenson 2008)

Despite its dangers and limitations I do not want to give up on the possibility of inclusive public space: for me it is at the heart of what lived democracy is about. To give up on this is to give up on too much of what makes democracy worthwhile, on democracy as a communal process of becoming which honours and depends on its continuing capacity to listen attentively to difference, both for its vitality and its legitimacy as a life-enhancing, socially just way of life.

Radical education, whole School Meetings and the public practice of democracy

Time does not allow the pursuit of all the questions raised thus far in this paper, though all of them continue to inform my current work and my future aspirations. As I suggested in my introductory remarks, I want to focus here on the development of certain kinds of inclusive public space – in particular, the practice of general or whole School Meetings of the kind exemplified in radical traditions of private and state education.

Perhaps the best know example of strong commitment to public space within radical democratic traditions of education is the General School Meeting developed at Summerhill School in Suffolk, a radical democratic private school set up by A S Neill in the 1920s, still going today under his daughter, Zoë Readhead. At the Meeting matters of importance to do with the daily running and future development of Summerhill are raised, discussed and decided together by the whole school, students and staff. Neill’s view about its importance is crystal clear: ‘In my opinion, one weekly General School Meeting is of more value than a week’s curriculum of school subjects’ (Neill 1968: 68). For other schools within the radical tradition of private education the General Meeting also held a place of pre-eminent importance, as, for example, in the work of John Aitkenhead at Kilquhanity House School, Castle Douglas, Scotland. It is also central to the disgracefully forgotten radical tradition of special education in the private sector as exemplified in the pioneering work of, for example, Homer Lane, David Wills and George Lyward, and in the public sector by Howard Case at Epping House School (see Weaver 1989 for a good overview).

Within the state sector of mainstream education examples are, unsurprisingly, even more sparse. Currently, the best known, though as I shall argue later, not the best developed, post-war example of something roughly equivalent to the General Meeting is The Moot at Countesthorpe Community College, Leicestershire where from 1970 to 1985, despite the fact that it had a headteacher, all key decisions of policy and practice, including the appointment and payment of staff, were taken by the Moot. This was a communal gathering open to all in the school, including non-teaching staff and students. All attending had one vote each and anyone was entitled to call a Moot. With one or two significant exceptional occasions, student participation was minimal and often confined to a small number of sixth form students and, for many teachers, the informal structures and very significant way in which students were involved on a day-to-day basis about their learning was what really mattered.

In my view, the most outstanding example of a General Meeting operating successfully within the radical state tradition of education is to be found in the work of Alex Bloom at St George-in-the East Secondary School, Stepney, London (Fielding 2005). In the decade between 1945 and 1955 Bloom's development of the Whole School Meeting brought together one of the most imaginative and most sophisticated unions of democratic learning and democratic governance this country has ever seen. Its success depended in part on the values it strove to realise in all aspects of daily encounter, in part on the nature of the curriculum it provided, and in part on the depth and detail of its democratic structural hinterland. It is to each of these three aspects of its supporting context to which I now turn.

In marked contrast to the national norms of secondary modern schools at the time, Bloom set out to build what he described in his own words as 'A consciously democratic community… without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition.' The work of the school was guided by an orienting set of perspectives that became known as 'Our Pattern'. Fundamentally, this was about the eradication of fear and the creation of a context for human flourishing that valued the contribution of each person and worked hard to develop a creative and responsive school community worthy of the loyalty and commitment of all its students.

The majority of the formal curriculum was co-constructed within the context of thematic work culminating in a School Conference in which work was celebrated and reviewed in both mixed age and in form groups. The remainder of the curriculum was negotiated through mixed age Electives in which 'children make up their own timetable'. There was thus substantial emphasis, both on continuity of relationships with a class teacher and on multi-facetted communal engagement with other students and staff. In addition there was strong commitment to learning outside the physical confines of the school. Lastly, students' own evaluations of their curricular experience in both its broad and narrow senses was sought and acted on through Weekly Reviews in which each student commented on any aspect of learning and teaching they felt appropriate.

The formal democratic organisation of the school was expressed through three core channels of work comprising the Staff Panel, the Pupil Panel, and, at school level, the Joint Panel. The Staff Panel met every Monday lunchtime and included all staff ie, about ten people. The Pupil Panel was comprised of the Head Boy and Head

Girl, their two Deputies and the Secretary, all of whom were elected by students. It also included elected Form Reps. The panel met every Friday morning in school time and considered all school matters. There were reports from Form Reps and business sent by staff. It also appointed a range of Pupil Committees which took responsibility for running various aspects of school life. The Joint Panel met on the last Friday of the month. It was comprised of members of both Staff and Pupil Panels and chairs of all Pupil Committees. Reports were given by a member of staff for the Staff Panel, by the Head Girl or Head Boy for the Pupil Panel, and by chairs of the various Pupil Committees. On the Monday following the Joint Panel Meeting there was a School Council/ School Meeting presided over alternately by a member of staff and by a member of the Pupil Panel agreed at the previous Full School Meeting.

Space does not allow a rich description of the conduct of a School Meeting. Suffice to say here that it typically involved a framing of purposes and aspirations, both by Bloom and by the Head Boy/Girl before each class offered a celebration of its learning. This was then followed by reflection and open dialogue between students and staff on any matter of concern or delight in the school. This would invariably challenge traditional hierarchies, with all ages and identities contributing before the proceedings were brought to a close by Bloom's affirmation of pride and joy in the work of young people.

Such practices and traditions take seriously the importance within a democratic society of creating a public space within which members of the community (in this case a secondary modern school of about 200 students and ten staff) can make meaning of their work and their lives together in ways which are rigorous and respectful, challenging and caring, and utterly committed to a way of being that sees individuality and community as both the condition and purpose of living our lives well together.

Sixty years ago, in this small secondary school in one of the toughest and poorest areas of London, we see glimpses of both the challenges and possibilities of developing a School Meeting as an iconic democratic practice. Many of the proper and continuing concerns we have about the possibility of developing an inclusive public space can be interrogated and understood not only in the different strands of its main narratives, but also in the 'petit ecrits', the little stories of subaltern spaces, exploratory practices and felt egalitarian encounters which provide a necessary preliminary to the larger community conversation.

Thus, contemporary concerns that the language of participation hides manipulative or disciplinary intent are countered by explicit, public commitment to inclusive democratic values and practices. Worries that there is little opportunity or desire to develop and name peer identities are ameliorated by a hinterland of subaltern publics, inclusive practices and person-centred relationships. Individual apprehension about speaking out is countered by the articulate solidarity of representing the views of others, not merely or only one's own and by daily opportunity for dialogue and discussion. Dangers that adults use complex language and abstruse or boring topics to alienate, obscure or dominate are countered by discourses and processes that elicit the engagement of all. Hectoring or admonitory uses of public space so typical of traditional schools is replaced by celebratory content chosen and articulated by students and confirmed by Bloom's closing remarks. Potential marginalisation of student contributions is countered by

traditions of democratic procedure that ensure parity of status and the insistent foregrounding of student experience. Subtly corrosive effects of the multiple realities of power or worries about the persistent susurrus of power beneath the surface of discussion are, often and unpredictably, met by the spontaneous leveller of laughter or by Foucauldian parrhesiastic practices of fearlessness and risk taking (Foucault 2001). Dangers of demagogic persuasiveness are met by the companion parrhesiastic interrogation of integrity by Meeting participants through shared community knowledge of the fidelity between the speaker's words and deeds. Finally, the dangers of institutional inaction are countered by the explicitly stated, empirically matched commitment to shared responsibility for future action.

Towards an intellectual framework for radical practice

One of the reasons I think practices like Neill's and Bloom's School Meetings are powerful and important has to do with what one might call the existential integrity, the reciprocity of felt encounter that helps democracy transcend the limits of procedural justice and begin to open us up to the lived realities of the other as a person, not just a citizen. It provides, if you like, an orientation which, whilst it includes intellectual or rights based imperatives, also willingly goes beyond them to see and feel the world differently. Part of this has to do with circumstances and orientations that help us to transcend traditional roles and re-see each other.

Within the context of the school these opportunities for 're-seeing' hold tremendous educative potential. It is a potential that lies primarily in their capacity to positively and creatively disrupt presumptions and orientations that edge us surreptitiously towards judgements that label and confine, rather than surprise and liberate a restless, insistent sense of possibility.

For those of us committed to radical democratic practice it is important to foreground ways in which we can (a) create conditions for challenging enquiry and (b) co-construct structural spaces where the kind of challenges that help us re-see each other and ourselves are recognised and legitimated. I offer the notion of 'spaces for restless encounter' in the hope that it names and articulates something of these desiderata.

In a moment I'll suggest some examples of such spaces at five different organisational levels within schools and the educational system as a whole. But, before I do, I want to say a little about the psychological and interpersonal conditions that provide an appropriate structure to support their development and productive use.

If we are to be surprised, if we are to re-see and re-feel in the ways I have advocated, then we have to attend to a three-fold process of affirmation, challenge and renewal. By beginning with affirmation as part of the process of engagement we are more likely to be open with each other and subsequently challenge each other as part of the process of re-seeing, of restless encounter. Encouraging subaltern spaces is a concrete example of taking the development of affirming arrangements seriously.

Having provided a range of sites and opportunities for appropriately diverse practices, the processes of actual encounter might usefully start with acknowledgement and celebration of different practices and orientations.

‘We need spaces for restless encounter – the product of joint work that helps us to see each other differently’

Thereafter, the dialectic of challenge and affirmation is more likely to lead to the exploration of new mutualities and privacies, to new ways of seeing and being in the world.

Finally, having worked together in this way, our prior practices and dispositions are either renewed, modified or, in some cases, replaced with alternatives rooted in the kinds of encounters just described. These are ‘restless’ encounters in the double sense that (a) they are the product of joint work that helps us to see each other differently and (b) they carry with them a positive orientation towards similar processes of learning in the future.

What, then, might spaces for restless encounter look like at classroom, department/team, curriculum, whole school, and systemic levels of engagement? Within the context of the classroom, restless encounters are likely to emerge from pedagogies that transcend easy talk about co-construction and require a process of mutual and interdependent student and staff learning within the context of knowledge and care for each other and the wider society to which they belong. At department/team level they might include approaches that invite student and staff perspectives on courses/units or which, through events like residential trips, enable a more holistic encounter within which we surprise ourselves and each other in ways which more traditional contexts and circumstances seldom allow. At curriculum level they might include regular opportunities, not only for emergent, inter-disciplinary work rooted in local pre-occupation and circumstances, but also more open-ended enquiry led by students or support staff or members of the community. At a whole school level they might include School Meetings of the kind described briefly in this paper. At systemic level it includes the crucial role of the radical traditions of state education exemplified by the work of pioneers like Alex Bloom who remind us through what is sometimes called ‘prefigurative practice’ that profoundly challenging alternatives are possible now. In doing so they hold a mirror up to our aspirations for a more creative, more democratic society and give us courage to live what we profess, to live a better future now.

Spaces for restless encounter do not provide us with a fully worked out intellectual framework for radical education (see Fielding 2007 for some preliminary thinking). Rather they suggest a dynamic form of engagement and a powerful theoretical motif that might usefully guide both our thinking and our practice in ways which prompt further development of an increasingly necessary alternative to a progressively moribund status quo. The potential and power of such spaces lie in their relational creativity, their insistent sense of possibility, and their profound understanding of the reciprocal necessity of love, justice and human freedom.

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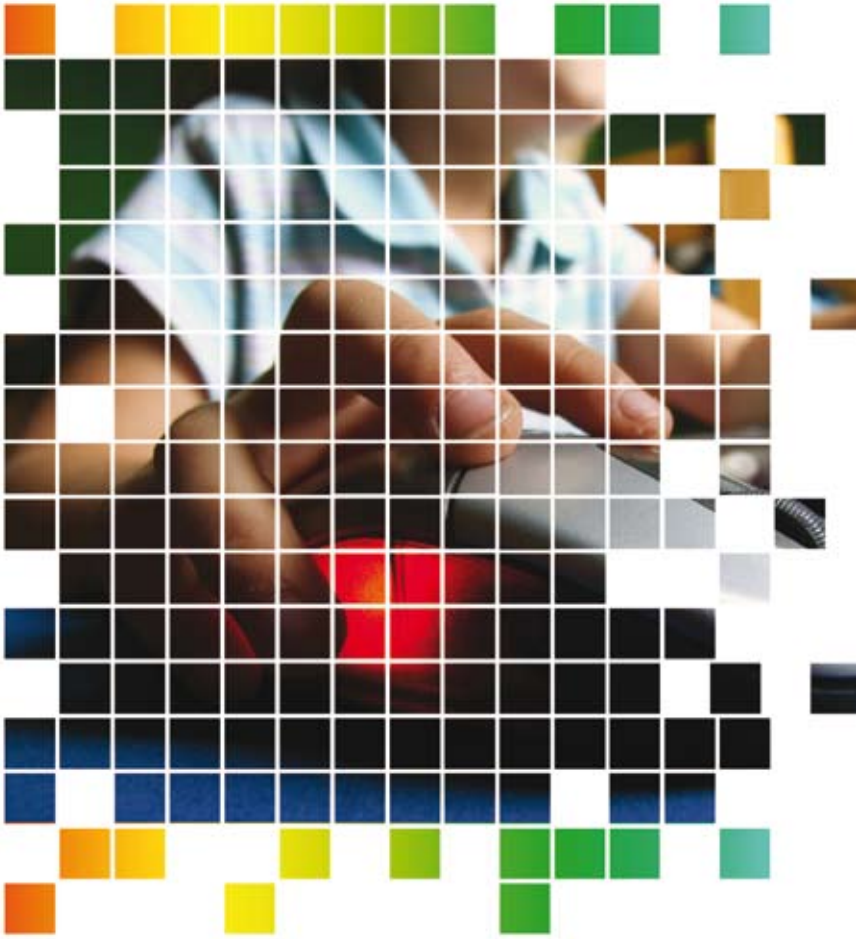

‘It feels like you’ve grown up a bit’: Bebo and teenage identity

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The following excerpt comes from an interview with a 15 year old. He is talking about photos of himself that his friends have on the social networking site, Bebo:

John:… *there’s a few primary school friends and that who’ve got photos from trips… so it’s quite good to bring back memories. Good times.*

Interviewer: *Ah ha. Does it make you cringe as well?*

John: *Yeah, ‘cos you get people saying, ‘Ah you’re so sweet.’ You’re so small.’ How much you’ve changed and…*

Interviewer: *Okay, so do you feel like you’ve moved on?*

John: *Yeah, it feels like you’ve grown up a bit.*

I have taken the title of the paper from this excerpt because it signals ways that social networking sites (SNSs) are used by young people to position themselves in particular ways. In John’s description, we see him positioning himself as ‘not sweet’ as ‘not small’ – it is his younger self that is represented in these photos. This is important for a 15 year old boy because it shows his maturation, and if we were part of his network we would have visual evidence that he is maturing. We also see him talking about building an archive through photographs – he is someone who has friends and has a history of having fun with his friends. Here he is displaying his popularity. The focus of this paper is on the ways Bebo offers resources through which young people position themselves and their online interactions, but also how the discursive practices that are surrounding young people’s use of SNSs are positioning young people.

I am seeking to explore the relationships between the *structures* of wider societal discourses (maturation and friendship) and the *agency* of the young consumer/producer online. In analysing structure and agency, my focus is on the tension which underlies many debates about young people’s online activities, between seeing young people as acted upon by societal forces and seeing them as independent actors in their own right. In John’s case, we see him being acted upon by discourses about maturation and popularity, but he’s also positioning himself **through** those discourses. And we also see him as an actor – on his Bebo site we could see the ways he chooses to display himself through his profile image and texts, various links to bands, videos, the skins he chooses, the comments he chooses to display from his friends and so on. We might assume that much of this public work is reflexive, that is, John is rethinking and recontextualising his ideas as he constructs his online profile. However, there is a risk that we celebrate SNSs as spaces which allow the users agency and we ignore particular characteristics and power structures embedded in online spaces. In researching online home pages, Susannah Stern rejects the notion that home pages can be read simply as reflections of the authors’ identities and argues that the home pages are constructed in relation to particular discourses and cultural practices (Stern, 2008). Dana Boyd researching MySpace argues that social hierarchies that regulate offline behaviour are also present online (Boyd, 2008). Therefore, young people’s voices online can also be seen as highly constrained.

However, I do not want to take an overly deterministic approach and dismiss or critique online profiles and communications as highly regulated and managed practices. The risk here is that we ignore the intentions, attitudes and understandings of the users themselves

as well as their agency to in some ways resist and shape the structures online. The analysis in this paper focuses on interviews with young teenage Bebo users and attempts to understand the role of Bebo in their daily lives, how these users position themselves in relation to discourses surrounding teenagers online, and how their agency is being enacted through the structures of these discourses as well as the structures online.

Researching Bebo

The study discussed in this paper draws on interviews and online data from 24 young people collected through two schools in the UK (one in London in an area of economic hardship, and one in a rural area with a socio-economically-mixed population). All the girls who were interviewed were on Bebo, whereas five of the boys used other sites and spaces (eg, MySpace and XboxLive), and three further boys were 'refuseniks' (refused to use SNS). Interviews were conducted in schools first in groups, at the end of which participants were asked further consent for the two researchers to visit their sites. Individual follow-up interviews were conducted with six girls and one boy to discuss their individual sites. They are also active on MSN's Instant Messaging service (MSN) and all have mobile phones. These different modes of communication are running parallel, often simultaneously. The focus of our study was on social networking sites; however, it became clear that MSN in particular was an important backdrop to their use of SNSs, as were their face-to-face interactions with their peers.

The focus of this paper is on the 16 Bebo users, and three themes I address focus on how users position themselves and Bebo: (1) the interviewees talk about Bebo as age-appropriate, (2) they talk about themselves as in control of their use of Bebo and (3) I will analyse how they talk about their presentation of self online.

Age-appropriateness

Bebo has been shaped both by its designers and its users (our interviewees) as an age-appropriate website for 14-16 year olds, particularly in relation to other social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Bebo is owned by AOL, a company renowned for its 'family friendly' approach (if family friendly is defined in terms of the amount of control parents can assert over their children). Unlike other SNSs, Bebo has a developed safety advice area. A key safety mechanism on Bebo is that the webpages are private by default – users must tick a box to make them public.

Some of the discussion about the age-appropriateness of Bebo was in reference to other SNSs they had tried, as this 14 year-old discusses:

Daniella: *I used to have MySpace, but I found it was too grown up for me. And I thought Bebo was a lot easier to use. And the same with Facebook. I've got my account but I never go on it.*

Interviewer: *So, you don't use Facebook?*

Daniella: *Well, I do sometimes, but that's only if I see that I've got an email from someone. But it's just because I don't know how to use it or change anything.*

Interviewer:… *When you say that it's too grown-up, is it about kind of setting up your profile, or is it about who's on there?*

Daniella: *Well, yeah, it's more like who's on there. Because when I had it I had loads of older people add me and I thought, 'Well, I don't want this,' because I think that's a bit perverted. So, I like deleted it. Because my sister's got it, but she's 20. And all her friends have got it. So I thought, 'Well, it's probably aimed at them more than it is me.'*

‘At a time of growing independence, technologies allow teenagers privacy from family (and, at times, from their peers)’

The interviewees are drawing on constructions of young teenagers as vulnerable and the internet as dangerous, and they position themselves in direct opposition to debates about ‘kids growing older younger’ (KGOY). In relation to these discourses, the interviewees indicate they are sexually modest (eg, not interested in older boys who are on Facebook) and interested in immediate friends rather than making contacts in the wider world. By being on Bebo where they only talk with their peers, they are safe inside the home (not on the streets) and safe from online predators. Furthermore, as in this excerpt, they clearly indicate they are not using sites which require advanced technical skills, thus positioning themselves as not the techno-savvy youth who might access adult content.

We can see in this excerpt, Bebo was seen as easy to ‘personalise’, in ways that were more difficult on other sites. However, although the interviewees commented on the ease of setting up their site, they indicated that after it was set up, they kept most elements the same (apart from changing the skin and the profile photo). This was verified in our observations of the sites over a period of eight weeks. One participant said:

> … as soon as you get [your Bebo account] you just go mad and just keeping adding friends and photos and comments on other people’s, and then I guess after a month or so it just starts to die down.

So after a Bebo account has been established, then it needs to fulfil a specific purpose. For our interviewees, Bebo became almost entirely a space to check in with and check up on peers through comments left on each others’ sites. In fact they said they **stop** adding material to their sites, ‘Because you have to scroll right down and it takes you like five minutes to get to your actual stuff you want’ (the comments). The data indicate that there is a progression over time in relation to the role of Bebo in the users’ lives. This is significant, first, because if we (adults) look at Bebo sites, we need to recognise many elements are static representations of the user, established at a particular point in time when they had ‘just gone mad’ rather than a representation which they have invested in creating and updating. A second reason to notice the progression over time in the use of Bebo is that before moving or graduating to Facebook they need to be at a point where they see SNSs as mainly for checking in with their friends rather than a space to create a predominantly visual online profile. We can see Bebo as a stepping-stone to Facebook which further emphasises the age-specification of both sites.

The interviewees who had Facebook accounts used them specifically for communicating with their siblings. The use of different social networking technologies for particular purposes and for specific audiences (siblings, parents, peers, close friends) was a recurrent theme in the data. Mobile telephones were used for one-to-one private communication with parents as well as friends. Similarly, MSN was used with close friends for private conversations. Interviewees with siblings who were on Bebo were particularly aware of family as part of a wider, more public audience and in some cases they used privacy settings on Bebo to exclude siblings. The key point is that the interviewees were using technologies to segment their audiences, to communicate in particular ways (more or less private/public) with particular people for particular purposes. The private/public nature is a key affordance of the different technologies, and one which links to the social-psychological development of the 14-16 year olds.

This is a time of growing independence; and the technologies allow them privacy from family (and at times, from their peers).

Us versus newbies – we're in control

The interviewees did not position themselves merely as young and vulnerable – they created a careful construct in which they were too young for Facebook and interaction in the wider world, but old enough to be in control of their Bebo use and to be aware of and have strategies to deal with online risks, as John indicates:

John: *Mine used to be private. And now that I'm… pretty much when I turned 15 I set it public. So like anyone can see it.*

Interviewer: *So, was it because you just felt more able to handle it when you were 15? You got older and-*

John: *When I was 14 I felt quite uncomfortable and that with these random people talking to me. But now you can just talk back to them and tell them that you don't really want to talk to them.*

The feeling of mastery and autonomy as demonstrated in this excerpt is particularly important during adolescence. This links to the discussions about their changing use of Bebo over time, when the interviewees were positioning themselves as experienced users.

Their mastery over Bebo was also demonstrated in their attitude toward particular components such as the Friends list, which they said was very easy to compile and 'didn't really mean anything'. In one interview, two girls told how they had two Bebo accounts each (because they had forgotten their passwords for their original accounts) and were unconcerned about starting over from scratch. They indicated that starting over meant bowing out of the competitions about who had the most friends. Again, this was a position that they felt able to take up after having established their profile and then developed their use of Bebo as a space to check in with friends, rather than a space to display one's self.

The interviewees also positioned their choice of displays as more 'random' and unintentional than is commonly assumed in discussions about 'identity management'. When discussing how they choose their profile photos or skin, for example, they position the choice as casual, something they do when they are bored. This is not to say that we should take this at face value and assume that the sites are not careful constructions. However, it is important to note that they construct their use of Bebo as casual and controlled (ie, not compulsive Bebo-users). Other users, particularly younger or new users, were described as 'addicted' to Bebo. In contrast, our interviewees commonly said they went on Bebo as a matter of routine and they were on and off Bebo 'whenever' and responded to others 'when they could be bothered'; the most common response described Bebo as something they did when they were bored, as this 16 year old describes:

Louisa: *Someone came on and said, Hi, so I sort of said Hi back, and they was like, I'm so bored, and I said, so am I, I'm just sitting here doing nothing and watching TV and MSNing at the same time. And they goes, I'm just sitting here, really bored and I was like, more fool you. Like thinking to myself, well, I'm sitting here, I've got my family with me but…*

Interviewer: *Do you think you were bored before but just didn't talk about being bored or...*

Louisa: *I don't know, might have been. Might have like, been bored and well, thought might as well tell someone I'm bored.*

Statements about boredom may be in response to their adult-controlled leisure time, and several of the interviewees projected forward to a time when they would be older, more independent and able to socialise face-to-face. But we also need to see the interviewees' statements about going online because they are 'bored' as a way of them positioning themselves as in control of their internet use and under the control of parents. In their construction, they are not going online because they are emotionally or socially dependent on Bebo and MSN. Rather, in some cases, they are online as part of their position as adolescents under the control of parents. This provides a counter-argument to common understandings of social networking sites as spaces which teenagers are unable to resist, are emotionally invested in and are dependent upon for their social interactions. Here we see online communication as much more banal than sometimes assumed.

Another construct which emerged across the interviews was other people's use of Bebo as 'egocentric' and therefore socially unacceptable. In describing this kind of behaviour interviewees used the terms 'delusional', 'ego searching', 'attention seekers', 'posers' and 'divas', so there is a serious amount of peer surveillance concerning how one presents oneself. Boys indicated that some girls display too much of their bodies and they show too much emotion or personal life on Bebo; and girls made the same accusations of some other girls and also accused some boys of showing-off their six-packs and displaying themselves 'drinking' alcohol (allegedly sometimes with the bottle tops still on). In spite of our interviewees' statements about other people displaying too much of their bodies or displaying too much of their personal lives, when we viewed their sites we found open declarations of love for their friends and people they were dating and we found images which some might classify as 'sexual'. The importance, for the interviewees, is the background and context of these displays. For example, one group indicated that declarations of love are allowed after three months of dating; and other interviewees, particularly girls, said that having photos with their legs on display is allowed if they are not posing to show off their legs (eg, showing legs is acceptable if their legs are on display because they are on a beach or in a football uniform). In these descriptions, there is clear evidence of practices control and surveillance on Bebo (Foucault 1977). [In forthcoming work, we have more developed examples of the importance of knowing about the cultural practices and the background narratives of the individual authors as part of the interpretation of online 'texts' (Ringrose, forthcoming)].

Presentation of self online

The discussions about what was considered socially acceptable indicate that the interviewees' presentation of self on Bebo is in some ways carefully constructed, in contrast with their description of their use of Bebo as 'casual'. Although they described their selection of profile photos as 'random' or selected by a friend, they said they would not put up bad photos of themselves. They are keenly aware of their audience of peer viewers, and indicated that they were careful when composing text to put on friends' comments.

Similar to discussions about the different uses of communication technologies, the interviewees contrasted the types of comments they would make on Bebo with comments made on MSN, saying that Bebo is the most public and therefore most care is given.

‘Statements about boredom may be in response to their adult-controlled leisure time’

Interviewer: *So what are the kinds of comments that go on Bebo?*

Sara: *Just that, what you’re up to, what you’ve been up to. Like, if you haven’t spoke to a friend, you go on to their Bebo, write a comment or you want to make plans with someone, I suppose you could do it over Bebo. Stuff like that, really… You wouldn’t, on Bebo you wouldn’t call so and so a bitch or something like that but on MSN you’ll slag off anyone. On, on Bebo you wouldn’t.*

As Sara indicates, the messages on Bebo are for touching base, making plans and not for gossip or sharing emotions or personal attacks; she is very aware of her public presentation of self on Bebo through comments she leaves, in contrast with the private presentation she makes on MSN. When asked if there was content on Bebo that they would not want parents to see, the interviewees indicated they had nothing to hide. (MSN chatlogs, however, were often password protected and interviewees said these contained information they would not want their parents or siblings to view.)

The interviewees’ comments about face-to-face communication further demonstrate an awareness of different presentations of the self. Face-to-face was constructed as, in some ways, very difficult because the presentation of self was spontaneous and therefore risky, certainly in comparison with the careful and tentative comments left on Bebo, but also in comparison with conversations on MSN. This is evident in the following discussion with 14-15 year olds:

Anna:… *when it’s face to face you… you don’t say everything. Because normally you’re a bit too scared to say everything.*

Gemma: *And they jump in.*

Anna: *Whereas it’s so much easier just to type it. And then enter it…*

Gemma: *If you have an argument online, then you can read through and like if you think something’s too harsh, just delete that and reword it. And stuff like that. And people won’t, like – You’ll begin to say something and then they’ll jump in.*

The affordance of online communication in giving time to think, either to compose clever ‘come backs’ or to revise wording, was a theme that ran across the data; and of course this relates to the affordance related to the private/public nature of different communication modes. This indicates the different presentations of self that are afforded by the different technologies, and the different ways teenagers are using the technologies for their own purposes.

Several interviewees mentioned being shy at school or ‘clamming up’ when talking face to face. Online communication was constructed as providing confidence, a safer place to take risks in terms of who you talk with (several mentioned talking with people online whom they knew from school but were in different social groups). Interviewees mentioned that it was easier to ask someone to be a friend online, to ask for favours (such as designing a skin) or to talk about feelings including expressions of love. Bebo was also discussed as giving them a chance to show their identity outside the school context (eg, through activities such as sport or drama, through images with friends or family, or through references to popular culture). Several interviewees said online communication enabled them to be themselves. However, common in the data was a feeling that this confidence and distance also posed a risk of saying things you regret. Importantly, online communication is recorded (on Bebo comments or MSN chatlogs), and this offered evidence of one’s own and others’ regrettable or negative comments as well as evidence of niceness.

‘The affordances of online communication give time to think, either to compose clever ‘come backs’ or to revise wording’

Finally, as in the original excerpt from John, for some interviewees presented Bebo as an archive of their presentation of self, as this 15 year-old girl describes:

> … And also things that remind me is when I used to write really weirdly. Like you know my, the word my? I put an i instead of a y, and I look and think, ‘Oh, my god. How pointless is that!’ [laughs] It’s embarrassing... at the moment I have a music video on there, but it keeps a record of all the ones you have. So you can like look back and think, ‘Oh, my god! Was I really into that music?’.

Similar to their changing uses of Bebo, not only does Bebo provide ways of feeling independent and in control, it provides visual markers of personal development.

Conclusion

The 14-16 year olds who are the focus of this paper are clearly aware of their presentation of self for different audiences. In some ways they portray themselves as the ‘Net Generation’, aware of and in control of different technologies for different purposes. They are also presenting themselves as adolescents – as controlled by adults and as aware of particular discourses that are shaping their online interactions. The analysis presented here provides evidence of times when they align themselves with discourses which position them as vulnerable to online risk, and other times when they present themselves as knowledgeable and skilful internet users. Here we see them dismissing SNSs as nothing more than a place to check in with peers. However, this is not to say that Bebo is insignificant. As indicated by these young people, Bebo is part of an array of cultural practices which they are using to mark their development and display their identity. The importance here is in understanding Bebo as one part of this array and seeing Bebo as a particular form of media/SNS. As researchers in order to analyse particular presentations of self we need to understand the context of those presentations and the ways they have been mediated through technology, social interactions, cultural practices and surrounding discourses.

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Discussion from the floor

Lots of questions about social networking arise – how do spaces mediate egalitarian relationships? Do teenagers really feel free to reject potential contacts?

Young people need (mediated) spaces both to talk to their teachers and to discuss amongst themselves. We need to see where these spaces exist, and to understand their place in a wider societal context. Some spaces and communities sustain people but others could be improved, if relations among teachers and pupils are to improve. There are precedents, successful attempts to democratise or radicalise educational spaces, that we should remember so as to keep the lessons in mind and keep the narratives alive.

Are teachers able to use technology with sufficient sophistication to enable civic publics? Why do they still tend to see technology as enabling naughty teenage culture? What are the limits of face-to-face participation (a whole school meeting works in a small school but not in today's large secondary schools) and can technology allow for a scaling up of participatory activities?

Let's not forget the refusniks – of internet, of social networking.

Schools everywhere are challenged by technology because they face bigger challenges – of inequality, of inclusion, of participation.

This seminar series has taken on a big task in seeking to fit together alternative pedagogies, youth studies, social studies of technology and many other approaches in a common dialogue, but it is worth doing.

Seminar participants

Khalil Al Agha
Victoria Armstrong, St Mary's University College
Savita Bailur, LSE
Shakuntala Banaji, Institute of Education
Cary Bazalgette
Sara Bragg, Open University
Cathy Burnett, Sheffield Hallam University
Barbie Clarke, University of Cambridge
Thea Cole, Twofour Learning
John Coleman, University of Oxford
Sue Cranmer, University of Oxford
Mike Cushman, LSE
Tim Daines, Cambridge Education ICT Service
Caroline Daly, Institute of Education
Ranjana Das, LSE
Chris Davies, University of Oxford
Wendy Earle, BFI
Michael Fielding, Institute of Education
John Furlong, University of Oxford
Anne Geniets, University of Oxford
Jenny Good, University of Oxford
Anastasia Gouseti, London Knowledge Lab
Lynda Graham, UKLA
Malini Gulati, London Knowledge Lab
Geoff Hayward, University of Oxford
John Holmes, University of York
Aime Kim, Institute of Education
Eun-mee Kim, LSE
Jisun Kim, Institute of Education
Mary Jane Kehily, Open University
Sarah Lewthwaite, University of Nottingham
Sonia Livingstone, LSE
Ingrid Lunt, University of Oxford
Arun Mahizhnan, LSE
Ursula Maier-Rabler, LSE
Liz Masterman, University of Oxford
Guy Merchant, Sheffield Hallam University
Steve Moss, Partnerships for Schools
Usha S Nayan, TISS, Mumbai

Kaarina Nikunen, SOAS
Becky Parry, Institute of Education
Caroline Pelletier, Institute of Education
Carlo Perrotta, Futurelab
Bernd Ploderer, Sheffield Hallam University
Mandy Powell, Institute of Education
Roser Pujadas, LSE
Dylan Rice, University of Sheffield
Carol Robinson, University of Brighton
Debi Roker, TSA
Julian Sefton-Green
Neil Selwyn, London Knowledge Lab
Gaynor Sharp, BECTA
Jane Shuyska, University of Oxford
Ros Sutherland, University of Bristol
Toshie Takahashi, Rikkyo University, Japan
Rachel Thomson, Open University
Richard Wallis, Twofour Learning
Yinhan Wang, LSE
Natasha Whiteman, University of Leicester
Rebekah Willett, Institute of Education
Ben Williamson, Futurelab

Speaker biographies

Mary Jane Kehily

Dr Mary Jane Kehily is Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University, UK. She has research interests in gender and sexuality, narrative and identity and popular culture and has published widely on these themes. Books include: *Gender, Sexuality and Schooling, shifting agendas in social learning*, (Routledge 2002) and, with Anoop Nayak, *Gender, Youth and Culture, young masculinities and femininities* (Palgrave 2008).

Rachel Thomson

Rachel Thomson is Professor of Social Research in the School of Health and Social Welfare. Rachel has been involved in a major longitudinal qualitative study of young people transitions to adulthood, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council since 1996 through the Children 5-16 and the Young People, Citizenship and Social Change programmes. The study is currently being archived with the support of a grant from the ESRC, and will be made available for secondary analysis (see www.lsbu.ac.uk/inventingadulthoods). Her research interests focus on gender identities, social change, sexuality, values, transitions and popular culture.

Michael Fielding

Michael Fielding is Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Foundations and Policy Studies at the Institute of Education, London University. Well known for his work in the fields of student voice and school leadership Michael brings a perspective strongly influenced by person-centred, radical democratic traditions of state education. If we forget history or marginalise purposes we may get somewhere faster – but not where we need to go.

His current research projects include: 'Supporting people working in ground-breaking ways: (i) Supporting innovative head teachers (ii) From Student Voice to Intergenerational Dialogue' – Esmee Fairbairn Foundation 'Evaluation of New Leadership Programme for Experienced Headteachers' – West Sussex Local Authority 'Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning: what does the research tell us?' – Department for Children Schools and Families Consultant to 'Youth voice in the work of Creative Partnerships' – Open University/Creative Partnerships.

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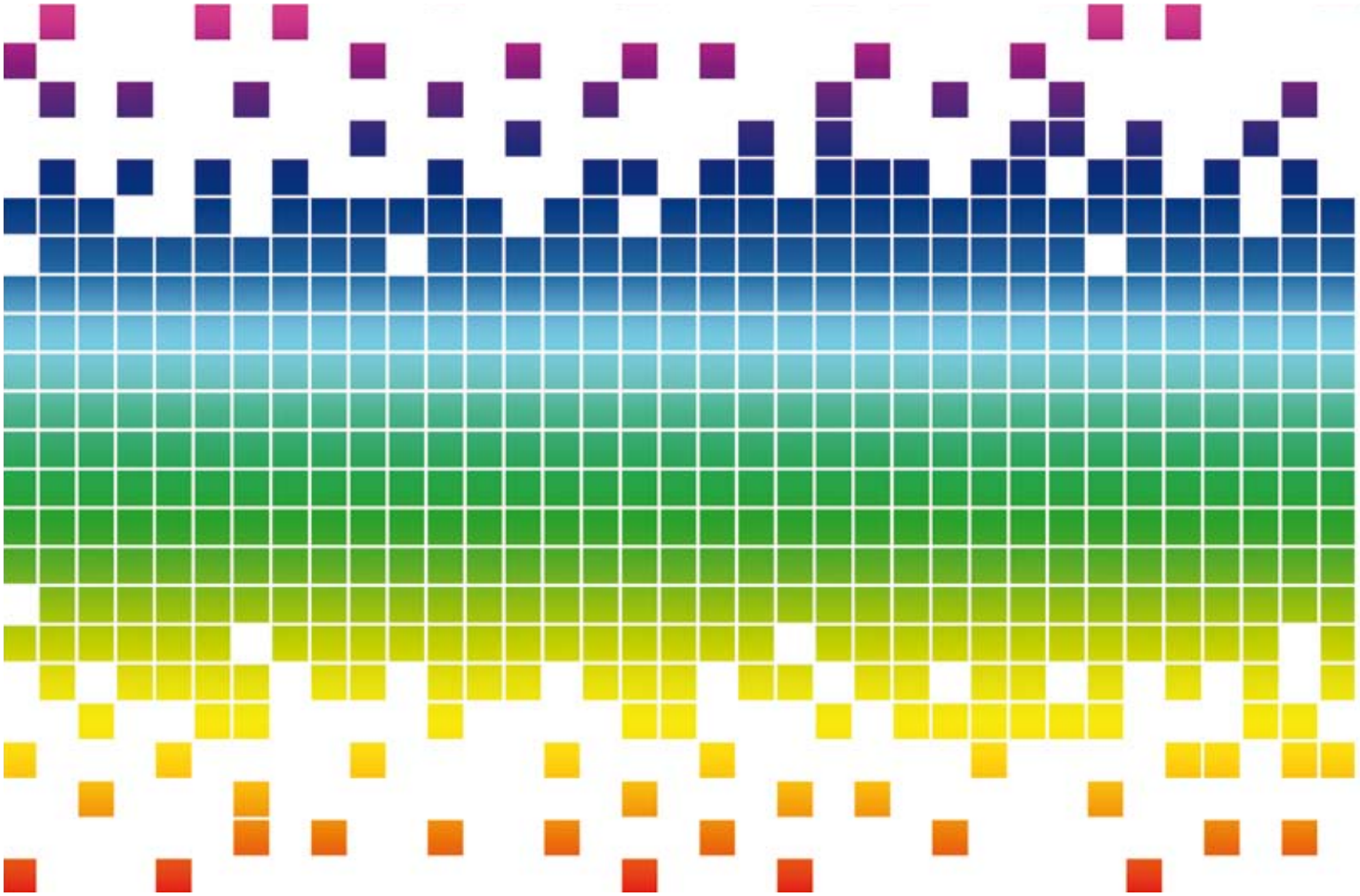
She is also a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, which is based at the London Knowledge Lab. Her research interests include gender, digital technologies, literacy and learning, and she has conducted various research projects on children's media cultures. In addition to publishing articles and chapters on the subject, she has also co-edited the following books: *Digital Generations: Children, Young People and New Media* (2006); *Play, Creativity and Digital Technologies* (2008); and *Video Practices: Media Technology and Amateur Creativity* (2009).