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The mediatization of childhood and education: reflections on *The Class*

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Introduction

Walk into any classroom today and you'll find a mix of smart phones, tablet computers and smart boards – for reading, viewing, searching and connecting. Walk into any family home today and here too you cannot fail to observe the plethora of screens and other digital paraphernalia – personally and collectively owned – again, for reading, viewing, communicating and connecting.

At school, pedagogic and policy debates have seized upon the ubiquity of new digital devices and contents to speculate about changes far wider than the mere import of technologies into the classroom, transformations in the nature of learning and literacy, the relation between students and teacher, and the positioning of curricular knowledge and pedagogic practices in the wider community. In the home, public and policy debates are often more pessimistic – bemoaning the loss of authority between parent and child, the array of risks associated with screen and networked cultures, the sense of changes happening too fast for social and ethical norms to keep pace. Yet in the home too, there are excited predictions about new informal opportunities for children and young people to learn, participate, create and connect.

Indeed, in the early twenty first century, it seems that a core societal value is that of connection. In our public and private lives, at micro and macro levels, getting more connected is called for, planned for and celebrated. Connections are heterarchical, agentic, creative. They can overcome barriers and blockages to facilitate interaction, hybridity, flexibility and flow.

Connection has been an important idea in many programmes of institutional reform, including in education, especially given the groundswell of opinion that schools are broken or that a twentieth century education is no longer fit to provide for twenty first century jobs² – i.e. that the structures of society no longer serve. It's also an important idea for childhood studies, since the sequestration of children in late modernity³ – the cultivation of innocence as an indicator of affluence – is being taken to such a degree in the global north that it's becoming a problem.

Given parallel claims that families too are broken, communities dissolving and the workplace highly uncertain, efforts to build bridges across these sites of learning and socialisation abound. By implication, the barriers that prevent the flow of ideas, knowledge and interest

across institutional and everyday sites are, it is feared, holding children back, and undermining their potential.

Now that digital networks underpin and enable social networks, it seems that the logic of the digital age dictates that connection is good and, therefore, disconnection is bad. In relation to young people, the hope is that the affordances of digital, networked technologies can be harnessed to connect disaffected youth with exciting learning opportunities, or disillusioned teachers with new ways of engaging their students, or marginalised families with forms of knowledge usually available only to the privileged.

Inspired by this idea, the Digital Media Learning initiative,⁴ funded by the MacArthur Foundation, is exploring possible solutions to the various ills of public education in the Global North, building on young people's interests in digital media to find new connections between home, school, community and workplace. A multitude of projects, including digital media learning centres in schools, libraries, after school and online, reveals the benefits when kids get together as fans and storytellers, as makers and creators, as coders and geeks, as community builders and civic campaigners.

As part of this initiative, the Connected Learning Research Network, led by Mimi Ito at the University of California, Irvine, has taken this agenda of problems and possible solutions as its test bed for examining the realities of children's learning across diverse contexts and domains of knowledge.⁵ What's emerging is a structuration approach⁶ that places its hopes in children's spontaneous agency and interests, and seeks to reshape societal structures from their current offer of overly narrow paths and unequal opportunities. This means putting a lot of effort not only into designing digital media learning opportunities but also rethinking learning, teaching, institutions, literacies, pathways – in short, reshaping the social, pedagogic and economic infrastructures of children's lives.

However, much of this work so far as focused on the experience of those at the leading edge - youthful digital creators, hackers, civic participators, activists and budding entrepreneurs – for these actualise the vision of the digital media learning community. Yet as surveys repeatedly show, they remain a small minority, with most youth viewing but rarely creating, downloading not uploading, following rather than setting the trend.⁷

For this reason, *The Class* was an ethnographic study of one year in the lives of a class of ordinary 13-14 year olds living in a socio-economically and ethnically diverse London suburb. Conducted at LSE by my and Julian Sefton-Green, the project asked the following questions:

- How are children's digital media activities embedded in daily practices and regimes of learning and leisure?
- Do digitally mediated activities and networks enable or impede young people's connected learning or opportunities in society?
- How do / could the wider opportunity structures of peers, school, family and community enable engagement, expertise and efficacy?

We hope to offer insight into how social, digital and learning networks enable or disempower, answering the often-asked question – what's changing now that our lives are full of digital technologies - not by offering any simple or dramatic answers, but by tracing

the contextually-meaningful but often small shifts in the meanings, practices and values people take for granted or try actively to reshape in their everyday lives.

The wider purpose is to capture the texture of the social and digital worlds of young people living and learning through the heightened anxieties and uncertainties of what Ulrich Beck calls the “risk society”⁸ or, as others dub it, late or reflexive modernity,⁹ or the network society;¹⁰ a society in which established structures are fading in importance, individuals are disembedded from tradition, collectivities are crumbling and new uncertainties and indeterminacies assail us on all sides.

The school we studied was perfectly ordinary and in many ways could be described as successful. Yet in terms of the young people’s learning, we found that experiences of narrow aspirations and blocked pathways were far more common than those of creative connections and new opportunities, and that digital technology uses had become part of a largely pragmatic and instrumental culture of learning. At home and elsewhere, we did find that some young people were exploring their identities, relationships and networks more creatively but still, the expectations of civility, the limits of interface design, and the ubiquity of surveillance by anxious adults proved constraining.

To make sense of these and other observations from the fieldwork, I shall draw on the theories of mediation and mediatization to frame the analysis and to help us understand, in particular, the question of media-related social change.

Theoretical framework

In media and communications research, we are no longer just concerned to examine what I might call ‘media and’ – media and politics, media and religion, media and education, etc. Today, developments in both the academy and, indeed, in the world demand that we rethink more fundamentally what it means to live in a thoroughly mediated world.¹¹ Taking a step even beyond this focus on mediation, a growing number of scholars is working with the notion of mediatization, to understand not only processes of mediation but also how changes in mediation have consequences for almost any and every field of society.¹²

Mediatization theory promises to draw together scholarship on the history of the media in particular (from, say, books to tablets in the classroom) with wider accounts of the history of mediation in any particular field (say, how the shift from books and tablets intersects with changing conceptions of teacher authority, the specification of the curriculum or the boundaries of the classroom) in order to grasp the changing role and significance of what we might call ‘media-as-a-whole (i.e. simultaneously as infrastructure, culture and ecology) on the many fields in society that, historically, have been largely separate (politics, family, religion, education, etc.).

In the field of education, for instance, Shaun Rawolle and Bob Lingard argue that digital technologies afford ‘new means of organising teaching and learning, and challenges to and effects on multiple practices in education, including pedagogy, curriculum and assessment.’¹³ But they do not interpret such changes simply or solely to the introduction of technologies. Rather, they contextualise the evolution of the education field in a longer history of modernity, whose key processes include standardization (consider the growing internal competition over status, as evidenced in the rise of league tables, standard testing and metrics

for external audits) and commercialisation (witness the now-endemic language of consumerism within education, with schools as service providers and students as consumers).

Some of these mediatization effects have been unfolding over half a century or more, not least in response to parallel changes in other fields of society. Thus rather than advocating a single linear process of historical change, Rawolle and Lingard conclude that ‘the solidity of meaning implied by the singular term mediatization collects together a plurality of overlapping processes, and suggests a complex interplay of media forces on and in education.’

This is to eschew claims of a radical break but not to tell a monolithic or straightforwardly linear story of historical continuity either. Rather, it is to recognise both how media in modernity have been part of the shaping of those institutions of family, school, state, etc. and, also, how they have played a part in their unravelling and reshaping in late modernity, as we shift from what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim calls a logic of structures to a logic of flows.¹⁴ And it is to recognise that today’s media are not merely the means of communicating on a grander scale than ever before humanly possible but they are also the infrastructure, the ecology and the culture that we live within. In this they have been shaped by the other ‘-izations’ of modernity, namely standardization and marketization – although, also, more optimistically, democratization and, more ambiguous perhaps, rationalization.

So what does this feel like, as a young person today? What is the experience of living and learning in the digital age?

Fieldwork

As the project title suggests, we have conducted an ethnographic study of one class in an ordinary school, over a full academic year, following them through a range of experiences and watching them change. Living in a very mixed neighbourhood, the class was aged 13-14 years – ‘the lost year’ in the UK system since it comes just before the year in which begin preparation for formal examinations (but, therefore, a year in which their educational decisions really matter, one in which, evidence suggests, some boys learn to lose and many girls lose their voice). Thirteen year olds are famously the despair of their parents, with their hormones raging, their many and conflictual bids for independence and, of course, mad about their smart phones and being on Facebook.

To trace their various paths out from school and home into their wider networks and activities, lots of methodological choices had to be made and lots of ethical dilemmas resolved. But essentially, we mapped the main spheres of their lives onto the three terms of the academic year – spending the first term observing and interviewing students and teachers in the classroom, spending the second term visiting their homes and bedrooms, talking to their parents, doing a media tour of the home and going online with the young people, and spending the third term – insofar as we could – joining some out-of-school activities or spending time with the peer group.

Making no judgments, our method was to uncover everyday processes of mediation, learning and networking, attending to the young people’s experiences – as they told them to us and also as we observed them. However, while the project purpose was to understand the pathways to connected learning, it was not this vision that gained us such in-depth access to the school and home environments. Rather – and recalling the anxieties of the risk society

popularly catalysed by the combination of youth, technology and change – it was the risk and safety agenda that got us in. Teachers were worried, parents were worried, and as a result, put simply, the digital media that we had hoped could connect spheres of learning were banned from school and often restricted at home.

As we shall see, the result was not only that many forms of connection that could benefit young people were little in evidence but also that there was a lot invested in disconnection. This came in part from the young people, their families and teachers, and for good reason given their perceptions of the risks surrounding them. It also came from the standardised, commercial products provided to mediate and manage their learning and communication. In the next section, I will discuss two of these that may surprise you to see discussed together: one is the School Information Management System (SIMS); the other is Facebook.

SIMS

I found it an interesting experience to return to the classroom, after some decades, and get a feel for what was familiar and what had changed. The blackboard of my youth had become a smart board, the teacher had gained a PC on her desk. But while much else felt familiar, the way everyone talked was startling. Consider an early fieldnote, from the start of a typical day:

Teacher to the class: “Did you meet your behaviour-for-learning target last week? If so, think of something else you can do to enhance your learning. Think carefully.” She checks SIMS [the school information management system] and announces who has a detention for lateness. As ‘Progress Day’ is coming up, she checks her computer for parent appointments and reminds the class. Then she returns to the computer to take the register, before turning back to the class to say, “Thank you for being good about litter,” and reads out a lengthy text on the smart board about cleaning up the litter at school.

This moment packed in several features of school life that became clearer as we got deeper into the fieldwork:

- Teachers and students spoke a highly reflexive language that bound together matters of discipline, attainment, and what Stanton Wortham, a classroom ethnographer, called ‘learning identity’.¹⁵ This language made sense to them but was somewhat excluding to outsiders including many parents, as we saw at Progress Day (when parents had their annual meeting with the class teacher).
- The School Information Management System was used routinely – checked constantly by nearly all teachers in most lessons, for its record of attendance, behaviour (good and bad) and grades – or, as they were called in the UK National Curriculum, ‘levels’.
- The Smart Board, present in every classroom and constantly in use, was predominantly used as a means of one-way communication – whether for print, as here, or for video, often accessed via YouTube. Rarely were its interactive features employed – for student input, collaborative work, blogs or remixing of curriculum materials – though we saw a few quizzes.
- Indeed, various forms of mass communication were ubiquitous – with Hollywood films used to illustrate history or geography, sporting events providing examples in mathematics, or BBC news as a point of discussion in tutor time. In each case, these seemed to be used to provide a point of common knowledge, a way of referring to

their lives outside school by emphasising what students shared rather than what divided them.

- Indeed, given the many differences of class, ethnicity and family background, by focusing tightly on the curriculum, scattered with some references to popular culture, the teachers sought to uphold the ideal of the democratic classroom, maintaining an atmosphere of civility, and a vision of everyone together following the same path, albeit at different paces. To give one example, we observed a series of lessons on the slave trade that ignored the evident diversity of ethnicity and poverty in the class and, instead, had everyone face the front to watch *Roots*.
- You won't be surprised to learn, however, that when we followed the young people out of school, home and elsewhere, or even when we looked beneath the surface of social relations at school, differences of gender, class and ethnicity were strongly present.

All of this was made possible – or, at least, made efficient – by SIMS, a piece of expensive proprietary software in use in around four in five British schools.¹⁶

While we saw little interactive use of the Smart Board, then, along with few other forms of interactivity – a rather ineffective effort to institute teacher blogging, an underused intranet platform, and few if any forms of digital connectivity between school and home – SIMS showed that the school could use technology in a highly competent manner when so desired. SIMS represented a complex, heavily used, digital, networked system of surveillance for close monitoring of attendance, behaviour, achievement, backed up by the shared teacher-learner discourse of performance management.

In lessons, the task of recording data into SIMS was demanding, with teachers entering data live into the computer or recording it on the white board and entering it later. Thus at the start and end of each day, the students' data could be read out to the class, making progress or failure visible, and inviting constant reflection on their learning trajectory. Behind the scenes, then, both attainment and behaviour are measured, standardised, available for manipulation. Since class time was heavily occupied in data collection, and since a panopticon-like punishment room awaited those whose record showed too many bad marks, we initially thought the system would be hugely unpopular with the students. But we were wrong, as both youth and parents explained to us:

Nick: “if you got three concerns on the class sheet in a week, you would get a detention. Then it would be one thing on SIMS. But now you would get four, because you would get the detention plus the three concerns.”

Salma: “It's quite good because they keep what track, like, if you're going on track. All your levels, they know all your levels and they know if you have to boost it or you're doing good. So I think it's good that they have all that.”

Gideon: “In Year 7, I just didn't care. Every lesson, I'd just be getting in trouble, and sometimes I'd get, like, a concern in every lesson, and then Year 8, I became a bit better. But I'd still probably get one or two concerns in a day, and regularly, every Thursday after school, I'd have detention.”

Adriana's dad: "Given the kind of school it is and the kind of intake it has... you know, they have to be fair and they can't just sort of selectively be disciplinarians for the people who they think might be trouble and let the others do what they like."

Here Nick relishes explaining the system to us. Salma appreciates the sense that the school is in control of her learning. Gideon measures his personal development in the language of the system. And Adriana's father speaks for many parents when he explains that so standardized a system seems to offer a kind of fairness to the students.

Facebook

Nearly all the class had a profile on Facebook, since for thirteen year olds in 2011-12, being on Facebook was the norm. Within the class, offline, friendship groupings tended to stratify by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. But such groupings were masked on Facebook, at least superficially, in the sense that there, nearly everyone was friends with everyone else.

So, rather like when they were all together in school, Facebook is a place where everyone is together. And contrary to media panics, most of the class did not want trouble, did not wish to navigate genuine differences among them. Rather, they wanted to hang out, to get on, and to keep an eye out for what was happening, for anything new or cool. Two typical comments from the young people were:

"I usually go on it to see what's happening. I don't really chat to people because it's, kind of, I can't really be arsed. It's kind of long as well, but if I want to meet someone, I usually just Facebook them to see what they're doing. But if they're not online, I'll just text them."

"I don't really put much on Facebook. Usually I use Facebook just for like say if I'm going to ask someone to do something, if they've got a contact."

Indeed, while hugely useful to them, so they retain their profiles, we could also see young people withdrawing their emotional investment from Facebook book, the more it became a civil space to monitor their peers and to be monitored themselves.

There's a fascinating contrast between this present use of Facebook and that of just a few years ago. In 2007, I was interviewing teens just at the moment when, it turned out, they were migrating en masse from MySpace to Facebook. While MySpace had been hugely enjoyed for its expressive affordances – fancy wallpaper, glittery fonts, mix of image, music and chat – so that a whole cohort of teens had become absorbed in customising their online self, experimenting with identity and transforming their self-portrait frequently – this activity suddenly faded.¹⁷

Facebook, with its clean, standardized, blue-and-white format looked mature, adult, desirable. And this became the new norm. But users transform platforms, and in response to its extraordinary popularity, Facebook changed.¹⁸ On the one hand, it became the focus of huge anxiety about risk – bullying, sexting, pornography, harassment – so it introduced privacy features, reporting buttons, help services, safety guidance. On the other hand, it sought to monetize its new success – collecting personal data, and insisting on a single identity to facilitate targeted marketing.¹⁹

The consequence – and perhaps young people would have changed anyway – is a new move, this time not to a single site but to a diversity of sites.²⁰ These are often riskier, parental anxieties are rising again, new companies stand to make money, but young people are having fun – the new sites are edgy again, social networking is more experimental, identities can be remixed, and new kinds of reflexivity about the project of the self have become possible.

But all of this is back under the radar. While Facebook rolls out its ‘Facebook for education’ programme,²¹ potentially to underpin connected learning across sites, and schools begin to think of using Facebook for group projects or civic efforts that span home, school and community, the kids are elsewhere, keeping their lives private from sensible adult visions, learning who knows what.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will return first to the theory of mediatization, and then to the theory of connected learning.

Currently, three ideal typical accounts of mediatization can be discerned, each with a different focus and timescale.²² First, on a timescale of millennia, there have been many and varied roles for mediation throughout the long durée of cultural evolution. For instance, children have always learned with and through technologies, defined broadly, long before the birth of the school, and those technologies have shaped what they could know. This is what I meant when I argued, a few years ago, that everything was mediated²³ – not only by media technologies but also by the many other material conditions that shape communication, exchange, space and time. While telling the story of how children have learned with media in different times and cultures is a bigger story than I can attempt here, it is a story that many have contributed to. Perhaps, despite many necessary qualifications and complications, some underlying processes that we might call the mediatization of learning or childhood is waiting to be described. But until they are, recognising the manifold contexts of mediation does not help us much in understanding what is changing, what’s new now.

The pressing sense that everything is newly in flux is what drives the second account of mediatization. Focused just on the last few decades, this examines the interdependencies between digital and networked transformations and other societal transformations (globalisation, individualisation, commercialisation, etc.) which together have been reshaping, perhaps deconstructing the familiar structures of society, including the nation state, the polity, the family, social class, unions, the market, the social contract, and more. Sidestepping the strongly contested opposition between historical continuities or radical breaks, and that between varieties of hyperbolic techno-optimism or pessimism, we have to acknowledge that any account of a process we might term mediatization (or, perhaps, digitalization or network-ization) - based on assessing socio-technological transformations in the digital age - can only be, at best, an account of history-in-the-making. We are simply too embedded in present developments to attain the wisdom that hindsight will one day bring.

As a theory of mediatization, then, I prefer the third account. This operates neither over millennia or decades but, rather, over centuries – specifically, the past few centuries that have taken us from what we can call high modernity through to late modernity (or, for some, post-modernity). It centres on how the forces of modernity have converged to produce the dominant corporate media sector that John Corner (1995: 5) described when he commented

on “the powerful capacity of television [and, we can now add, ‘the internet’] to draw towards itself and incorporate (in the process, transforming) broader aspects of the culture” and also to project its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs”.²⁴ Or as Stig Hjarvard (2012: 30) puts it, mediatization is the ‘double-sided development in which media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time as they become integrated into the very fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business, or family.’²⁵

But in my fieldwork, I see value in all three forms of mediation, on all three timescales of media and societal change.

The first account is helpful as a reminder of the diverse and nonlinear nature of change over the long durée. For instance, in the UK, just as we ended our fieldwork, the Government abolished measuring attainment on the national curriculum in terms of levels. What this means for SIMS or, more broadly, for the discursive relation between teachers and students, remains to be seen. It seems astonishing for the generation of teachers and young people who had learned to organise their shared discourse of learning and learning identity in these terms. Then, reminding us of the many and convoluted paths of cultural evolution, the heavy focus on quantifying learning that we saw in our UK class has few echoes in the Danish classroom, and seems differently managed also in the American classroom.

Another reversal is evident in the way that, even five years ago, kids were flocking to Facebook as the cool and grown up place to conduct their relationships; yet its very popularity required Facebook to change - becoming more safe and sensible. The result is that it is no longer edgy and so, rather than everyone congregated on the one, standardised site, young people are diversifying in how they network and explore their identities.

The second account attunes us to the most recent developments – potentially transformative if scaled up and sustained – in, for instance, teachers’ (variably successful) efforts to blog, providing a digital bridge between teacher enthusiasm to pursue their subject and student engagement in creative ways, outside the formalities of the curriculum and classroom. It reminds us that while our fieldwork site, like many, had banned portable digital devices of any kinds from being used on the premises, other schools are experimenting with providing tablets or laptops, or permitting students to use their mobile phones, to facilitate collaborative and cross-site learning. In my colleague Craig Watkins’ fieldwork, for instance, an enterprising teacher is using his afterschool computer club to legitimate the creative musical knowledge of ethnically marginalised youth, inviting a reconceptualization within the school, home and workplace of traditional valuations of young people’s literacy and expertise.²⁶

The third account, however, positions both the above as subject to – and in a sense outsmarted by – the rationalizing forces of modernity. For the fieldwork material presented here shows that while people can see the opportunities of connection, nonetheless at times of anxiety and heightened risk such as we are living through today, they prefer safe structures and pathways. Standardization is seen not as the enemy of creativity and individuality but as offering a fair chance to all, a civil space that avoids the clashes of (risky) difference.

And in a context where traditional institutions are ever less able to guarantee desired outcomes (valued learning, secure jobs, meaningful friendships, embedded social capital, a foothold in a successful future), a gap has opened up where big business is stepping in to

promise particular kinds of connection, particular forms of support. These do, doubtless, deliver some benefit, but they rule out other benefits along the way, particularly those within the vision of connected learning – collaborative, flexible, creative, interest-driven. An added irony is that, to sustain their hold on people’s imagination, they have to be in the *avant garde*, becoming the early adopters of ‘our’ new visions of connected and participatory opportunities, which they then package, monetise and sell back to the ‘late majority’ public, building in strategies for risk management, data collection and marketing along the way.

And yet the challenges for families and schools are indeed significant in the risk society. The claims of radical reform movements, including that of connected learning, remain unproven, making it risky to place too much hope in them. And much of the force of what I have here theorised as mediatization is essentially rationalization – yes, including standardization and marketization, but also democratization.

So shall we give up on the digital media learning vision? On pursuing how digital media technologies can be designed and contextualised so as to contribute to new forms of living and learning in the digital age? On bringing children’s outside interests and expertise into school, validating and extending it? No, there’s too much research on the benefits – albeit in highly resource intensive and distinctively flexible settings – for us to give up on it. Instead, I suggest, we should ask not only how to enable connections, where these can be productive, but also what’s motivating disconnection – we should see this as an act, sensible in its particular context, rather than merely an impediment. And rather than simply blaming teachers, parents or young people for failing to rise to the occasion, we should think more deeply about the entrenched commitments, anxieties and aspirations that make people so seemingly conservative in the digital age. This may involve us in a longer process, and a larger struggle, than we initially envisaged.

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¹ This chapter draws on the work of The Class, conducted with Julian Sefton-Green as part of the Connected Learning Research Network, led by Mimi Ito and funded by The MacArthur Foundation. Thanks to the network for discussing the ideas in this chapter and to Rafal Zaborowski for his work with us on The Class. See <http://clrn.dmlhub.net/projects/the-class>

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²¹ For example, http://fbhost.promotw.com/fbpages/img/safety_resources/ffeclg.pdf

²² Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (2014) Mediatization: An emerging paradigm for media and communication studies. In Lundby, K. (ed), *The Handbook on Mediatization*. Mouton de Gruyter.

²³ Livingstone, S. (2009) On the mediation of everything. ICA Presidential address 2008. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 1-18. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/21420/>

²⁴ Corner, J. (1995). *Television form and public address*. London: Edward Arnold.

²⁵ Hjarvard, S. (2012) Doing the right thing: Media and communication studies in a mediatized world. *Nordicom Review, Supplement* 33(1): 27–34.

²⁶ See <http://clrn.dmlhub.net/projects/the-digital-edge>