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Youthful participation: what have we learned, what shall we ask next?

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First Annual Digital Media and Learning Conference:
Diversifying Participation
 February 18 – 20, 2010
 University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California

Closing Keynote:
"Youthful Participation:
What have we learned, what shall we ask next?"
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Introduction

The subject of this conference brings together:

- educators, political scientists and civic activists who seek to reinvigorate tired, even failed institutions of learning and participation with the exciting potential of the digital;
- those whose primary commitments are to children and youth – asking what do they need and deserve, especially now that the digital seems to overturn generational hierarchies, unsettling authoritative adult structures with the exuberance of youthful creativity;
- there are technologists and designers here too, fascinated by what can be made and done, hoping to see new ways of thinking and acting enabled by new ways of connecting people and ideas.
- I come from a fourth constituency – and there are a number of us here – for whom the emphasis in digital media is less on the digital than on the notion of *media*.
- So although our different starting points fuse and intersect, for me the fascination lies in the shift from a communication environment primarily managed face-to-face, then increasingly complemented – even overtaken by – modern mass media, to a thoroughly mediated world shaped by interactive, convergent and networked media, populated as much by hybridised and intersecting texts and forms as by creative and participatory though also socially constrained readers.

However, I do not mean to be media-centric: what *matters* about media is less changes in media *per se* than how they shape, influence, enable or undermine the activities of young people, parents, teachers, educators, politicians, youth workers, civic bodies etc.

In other words, I am interested in the *mediation* of education, identity, citizenship, relationships, knowledge, creativity, power.¹

- Once, media technologies occupied a discrete portion of our analytic space – along with other institutions or social and personal spheres (education, work, family, citizenship, friendship, selfhood). We could analyse each separately or interrogate their overlaps. The media were nouns – television, radio, cinema, press. But as analogue media were replaced by the digital, an adjective, it seems that everything has become mediated.²
- Now we must contend with the contemporary prefixing of 'digital' to almost anything and everything interesting, resulting in the construction of a research focus which is superficially

homogenous and yet extraordinarily heterogeneous. Though we are fascinated by this expansion of our ambitions, we can no longer delimit or bound our task, and our expertise is often stretched too far.³

A wider view

Being originally a social psychologist, my interests have long been grounded in the micro – I want to understand how people, especially the young, generate and sustain a meaningful sense of themselves and their place in the world in a communication environment replete with meanings not of their own making.

Where I used to interview people as they sat on the sofa in front of the television, often sharing the same soap opera or talk show, now I interview children in their bedrooms as they follow their interests online or check out their social networking sites.⁴

But with the expansion of our analytic domain, the prefixing of everything including identity, learning, participation and culture with 'digital' – I must widen my gaze. For although media are ever more privatized (experienced in bedrooms, listened to with headphones, carried in pockets and kept under pillows), the digital intersects with an ever widening array of social activities and spheres of life, public as well as private.

Not only does this mean we must follow digital media use wherever that takes us – as many have been discussing here, but we also need a wider view of digital media than we can obtain by keeping our noses close to the screen. To this end, I have found useful the work of Friedrich Krotz,⁵ who pulls together many debates regarding processes of social and historical change in late modernity in arguing that four fundamental processes are at work:

- globalisation (the transcendence of the nation-state with transnational flows of economy, influence, people and ideas, including bringing self and other into newly reflexive if often unequal relations)
- individualisation (the disembedding of traditional, hierarchical relations and their reembedding in often heterarchical or peer networks freed from the constraints – or anchors - of class, ethnicity, gender),
- commodification (the interpenetration of instrumental and market values, along with practices of measurement, standardisation and surveillance into the lifeworld)
- mediatisation (the gradual reshaping of institutional and individual realities across all spheres of society to accord with the logic of media systems and media forms).

Mediatization, the historically and technologically shifting processes of mediation, is *on the one hand* dependent on the former three processes, for media logics are perhaps little more than the logics of globalisation, individualisation and commodification combined. And, *on the other hand*, these self-same processes are thoroughly dependent upon the existence and expansion of media and communication technologies, networks and services.⁶

After just a decade or two, we must acknowledge that life without digital media would not be life as we know it – something it took centuries to say of the book, something we may *still* not say of television. But things are perhaps moving a bit too fast for us, and despite listening carefully to the discussions at this conference, I am still puzzling over what life with digital media is or could be.

So, let me take from Krotz' analysis three *points of critique* by which to focus my remarks today – the empirical (what's going on?), the explanatory (how shall we understand it?) and the ideological (in whose interests?).⁷

First, what's going on, what's new?⁸

Lori (17)

"I think in comparison to my parents and loads of the older generation I know, I do know more. But I think there are a lot of people that know a lot more than me... A lot of my friends know a lot... And I learn from them."

Now that the first excitement regarding digital media is, perhaps, over, it seems to me important also to be careful, and critical of the often strong claims being made in relation to digital youth, digital participation and digital learning.

- Exactly what claims are being made about digital media and do these involve concepts (learning, participation) that are clearly defined?
- Does the evidence support the claims and have we examined alternative claims, or evidence that doesn't seem to fit?
- Have we compared studies that find different or contradictory results so as to understand why?
- Are we careful in not overextending claims to 'all' groups or cultures or technologies without evidence?
- Have we sufficient independent evaluations of new initiatives?

I'd like to see more work on all of these issues, especially insofar as this opens up a critique of claims about a digital generation or digital youth.⁹ For it does not take a lot of research to identify their struggles with technology, and in my work I've been interested in these also:

Observational notes from 13-year-old Candy's middle-class household

Candy was trying to find a German website on food and drink to help her school work. First, she checks with her father that '.du' is the German url suffix. He suggests '.dr' for Deutsche Republik or 'just to leave the last bit off and see if it finds it', but this doesn't work, so she tries www.esse.com.du. This doesn't work, so she tries .de, with no more success. The researcher suggests www.essenundtrinken.com.de but this doesn't work either, because mistakenly Candy typed 'trinke' without the 'n'. Even with the 'n' added, the url doesn't work (the .com is a mistake). Her brother, Bob, comes across to try to help, but he can't remember any German sites. Now Candy is trying www.yahoo.co.du. Bob suggests capital 'D'. Her mother suggests .uk to see if 'the whole thing is working'. Her mother clicks on 'refresh' but Candy warns, 'Don't do that! It goes on to a porn page!' Finally, her mother tries www.yahoo.co.uk, which works. The family concludes the problem lies with the German site and Candy gives up.

Observations can bely the conclusions implied by surveys – over 90% of children use the internet; the internet is the first port of call for finding information; teens spend more time online than other generations, and so on.

Observational notes with Megan, 8, from a working-class family

Megan's parents greet me proudly – their daughter is 'an information junkie', they have high educational aspirations for her. When I sat with Megan, I found her internet use to be concentrated on AskJeeves for searching, Nickelodeon for games, and a few sites about pets (e.g. Petstore.com). She clicked fast, rarely stopping to see what might have gone wrong, and her use of these sites was often frustrating.

Returning when Megan was 12, I find her skills have developed but still they are limited. She had lost the password for her Neopet, and could not manage to get the webmaster to email it to her. She has an email account but rarely uses it, and she ignores invitations on sites to chat, vote or email. When I ask what is bookmarked under 'Favourites', she says she does not know, having never looked. When something goes wrong, she just moves to something new rather than working out what happened.

If we overestimate young people's skills, we may underestimate their need for support. In the UK, a national Children's Media Literacy Audit of 12-15 year olds found that two in three check the reliability of what they find (asking themselves do other people recommend it, is it up to date, has it a trust mark, can you confirm the information across sites) but this is no more than checked reliability two years ago, and it leaves a large minority who make few if any checks.¹⁰ More guidance is clearly needed.

Doing research, it's easier with books than on the internet – but maybe it's quicker because there's so much on the internet. What you want to find is really hard to find. With books it's a lot easier. I can't really use the internet for studying.

(Abdul, aged 17)

'Every time I try to look for something, I can never find it. It keeps coming up with things that are completely irrelevant ... and a load of old rubbish really.'

(Heather, 17)

Further, if we overestimate youthful skills, we may misunderstand their practices. One headline a few years ago screamed, '*Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy*'.¹¹ This in response to survey finding that many have their social networking profile set to public. But I found over and over again, when sitting with teens in front of their profile, that this was a matter of skills more than values.

Observations on social networking

When I asked teens to show me how to change their privacy settings on their social networking profile, they often clicked on the wrong options before managing this task, showing some nervousness about unintended consequences of changing settings (referring to 'stranger danger', parental anxiety, viruses, crashed computers, unwanted advertising and unpleasant chain messages).

Having set his profile to private, Billy (14) tells me it can't be changed to public.

Leo (16) wanted his profile to be public, since it advertises his band, yet still says uncertainly, 'I might have ticked the box, but I'm not 100% sure if I did'.

Ellie (15) signed up for the London network instead of that for her school when she first joined Facebook and now can't change this, saying 'I probably can, but I'm not quite, I'm not so great that, I haven't learned all the tricks to it yet'.

When asked whether they would like to change anything about social networking, the operation of the privacy settings and the provision of private messaging on the sites are teenagers' top priorities, along with the elimination of spam and chain messages – both intrusions of their privacy. Hardly the responses of a generation that doesn't care, rather, those of generation forced to negotiate its privacy with inadequate tools and impossible privacy policies.

Changing the questions

The hyperbole surrounding the notion of ‘digital native’ (or ‘digital generation’) reveals a tendency to ask questions the wrong way round – as if the technology brought into being a whole new species, a youth transformed, qualitatively distinct from anything that has gone before, an alien form whose habits it is our task to understand.

If we are to understand really what’s new about the digital and how this is tied to other vectors of change – in childhood, family, education, civil society, culture – I think we need to ask different questions.

- Not *what can or what does the digital offer to learning or participation* (as if we already know what these are).
- But, among all the factors shaping learning and participation, *why, when and how does or could the digital contribute, if at all?*
- This is a harder task, but if we stick to the former we will never escape the charge of technical determinism.
- My point is both theoretical – what are all the other elements framing children’s engagement with digital media? – and also methodological – how can we include these in our research.

Megan, now 12

At the start of my return visit, she showed me how the AOL kids’ home page offered a story writing option. The site contained a standard story with gaps – you insert your own name, that of a friend, your favourite colour and so on – and the result was a personalized story to print out. Megan enjoyed this, and I might conclude that the internet affords her interesting opportunities to develop her creative interests. But I would have been wrong.

Our discussion then turned to story writing in general, and Megan switched to Microsoft Works to show me a story she was in the middle of writing. This turned out to be a lengthy, closely written thriller, heavy on dialogue and drama, containing tragedy, murder, and centring on a mysterious beautiful foreign woman saying dramatic and intriguing things as she rushes about solving mysteries. In telling her story, Megan had employed elaborate forms of expression, a complex vocabulary, and an exciting and witty writing style, if rather breathless and melodramatic.

The contrast with the ‘creative’ opportunity afforded by AOL was striking, and it was a glance at her bedroom – full of books – that revealed the source of her inspiration. So, my question is, not what does the internet offer Megan but, given a starting point of all the different things going on in Megan’s life, most of them nothing to do with the internet, do interactive and networked media really add? And what about instances like this, when they even detract?

Interview summary

Mary, 18, was completing her A’ levels in a well-off family in the rural north of England and hoping to study medicine. Having reached voting age, she feels it important to think about politics but finds it hard: ‘I know what I’m thinking but I can’t get it out properly... I can’t put it into a proper argument’. So she asks her parents’ advice on how to vote, despite scepticism about democratic participation: ‘Yeah, you’re allowed to say what you think but it might not always be heard’.

The internet, as she sees it, is for communication and information: ‘I go on MSN and talk to my friends.... I use it for school work.... I just use it for work, all search engines and stuff’.

For more serious matters – news, medicine, science - she replies, 'I wouldn't look on the internet. I would probably ask my Mum if there's anything in the paper about it or I'd have a look in the paper and then I'd sort of have a discussion with my Mum or Dad, Mum and Dad if, 'cos they'll, one of them will have heard about it.'

From asking Mary about the internet, I might conclude that she typifies youthful 'apathy'. But from asking her about the rest of her life, I discover that she is a member of the school council, and this requires her to campaign for her own election, mentor junior pupils and 'do speeches and stuff'.

In short, she uses the internet, she is interested in the world around her, and she engages in civic participation. But she sees little connection between the internet, learning and participation. I'm interested in asking, then, whether this matters – is the normative agenda here for all youth to use the internet for participation? Or just those who choose to? Or just those who are otherwise excluded? And is Mary missing something here, in not using the internet to participate?

Let's think more about childhood and youth to understand what young people do online.

As children, it seems, are getting older younger (because of marketing, commerce, the sexualisation of culture, and because of the competitive pressures exerted by what's been termed the offensive middle class) while also staying younger longer (because of extended education and delayed employment and financial independence). They are held for longer than ever before in a tension between childhood and adulthood, dependence and autonomy. They seem too knowing, too confident, to submit to the authority of teachers and parents, yet the expectations on them to compete, to achieve are ever greater.

Parents are trying to recognise children's independent tastes and interests, even rights by democratising their relations with them. Yet society blames failing parents for all the ills of youth, adding to their burden of responsibilities with ever apparent failure of the school or state. Add to this a fear of the streets that keeps children home longer, and one can see how media look like the solution to many problems: a way to occupy children indoors, though preferably off in their bedroom, to reward or control them, an opportunity to express and maybe redress the various tensions surrounding youth.

So, on a wider view of childhood, we can see how the media, increasingly, fill that gap, occupying not only their time, their private and public spaces and their disposable income but also mediating their identities, their privacy, their intimate relationships and their wider connections.

In other words, at least some of the explanation for why young people are turning to digital technologies, or why society sees these technologies as offering a solution, lies neither in youthful motivation to use technologies nor the appeal of the technologies themselves, but elsewhere –

- parental uncertainties over what knowledge is worth passing on;
- teachers' sense that the system they are locked into doesn't serve children's interests;
- the loss of alternative activities from playgrounds, affordable swimming pools or local community centres;
- the years youth must be productively occupied where once they were already in work, joining trades unions or learning a valued craft.

We need to look wider than youthful uses of technology to understand these uses.

Moreover, in today's cynical and uncertain society, highly attuned to risk, lacking in trust and doubtful of tradition, childhood is becoming – as Ulrich Beck puts it¹² - the last place of enchantment. For parents, for society, childhood remains special, precious, a last source of hope and inspiration, making them wish to give their child every opportunity, never to deny them. But this tendency to

imbue childhood with enchantment also drives the construction of childhood as threatened, risky, fragile.

In other words, perhaps paradoxically, by celebrating children's creativity and positive values, we may inadvertently fuel the repressive anxieties and actions that, by seeking to preserve their innocence, also keep them under surveillance, apart from life.¹³

It is in this context I can better understand their search for freedom, connection and identity online – a space allowed for them, ironically, by the popularity of the digital native rhetoric among parents and the media.

Anisah, 15, interview summary

A lively and confident girl, who lives in a small house on a troubled housing estate, her highly educated parents had not found work in the UK which matched their qualifications. This leads them to place huge educational expectations on their three children – evident in their many encyclopaedias and educational CD-ROMs, the emphasis placed on homework and computer access, and the parental support for children's offline and online learning.

Life centres around school and church: Anisah is articulate, hardworking, serious, moral – she uses the internet to read the news, revise for exams, plan further study, never to download music. But, with the mother out of the room, I discover Anisah spends many evenings on the internet until late into the night chatting with her friends. And her mother, on her return, seems to focus her anxieties about Anisah on the computer – seeing her both as part of the 'guru generation' and as in need of strict guidance (for 'children are children'), and this sparks a row between them even in the interview.

The internet is, then, not only a source of new opportunities but an escape from offline constraints. In my research, I have found that the online opportunities and risks, as adults define them, go hand in hand – the more children experience of the opportunities, the more also of the risks.¹⁴ I think this is why the risks often lurk, present but little spoken about, in discussions of digital learning and participation.

- First, because children do not draw the line where adults do – so these are often the same activity – making new friends or meeting up with strangers; exploring your sexual identity or exposing your private self, remixing new creative forms or plagiarising/breaking copyright.
- Second, because the design of digital resources confuses, bringing opportunities and risks into collision – search for information on sex or images of teens and you'll see what I mean. Consider the difficulty of deciding if a pro-ana forum is an opportunity or a risk.
- Third and most important, because learning involves risk-taking. To expand their experience and expertise, to build confidence and resilience, children must push against adult-imposed boundaries: identity, intimacy, privacy and vulnerability are all closely related.

Hence I'd suggest a fourth participatory genre for Mimi Ito and colleagues,¹⁵ which I'll call 'playing with fire'. Children are not weirdly motivated to take risks online; they are motivated to explore precisely what adults have forbidden, to experiment with the experiences they know to lie just ahead of them, to take calculated risks to test themselves and show off to others.

- Playing with fire is evident when children hold lively conversations among themselves about paedophiles – whether the 'dirty old man' in the park or the 'weirdo in the chat room' – in their attempt to work out for themselves what adults consider 'normal' or 'dangerous'. They have fun teasing a suspicious man in a chat room – the latest instance here, now that we've made social

networking sites so nice and safe, is Chat Roulette – where my daughter tells me you can meet a rapist.

- This not so very new – where once young teenage girls told their parents they are staying at a friend’s house but then dare each other to sleep in the street or park instead – now they play with fire online. It’s evident even from their screen names – Lolita, sxc babe, kissmequick.

Candy, flirting in a chatroom

She asks, “Hi r there any fit guys on here??? pm me if interested.”
Responses come freely –“giz uz a snog” and,, “FUCK OFF BITCH”

Rosie, 13

“I’ve got about five buddies on my thing, but you can’t really say, oh, this is a young girl, she’s got brown hair, blue eyes, ’cause she could be an old – she could be a he and it’s an old man but I suppose it’s quite nice to just say, oh, I’ve met someone on the internet.”

Manu, 14, likes to be offensive in chatrooms

“I drive people out all the time, it’s my speciality. When the room is empty, I feel really content with myself. . . . I just sit there and wallow in my glory and then I leave. I might go to another room.”

Mark and Ted, 14

In one observation, they try to disrupt an adult Yahoo chat room for police and fire officers, pretending to be a blind orphan in a home with abusive carers. They type: “Help!” and “They’re coming to get me!”

Children, I am suggesting, learn through taking risky opportunities. And the digital is the realm we adults have, for now, given them to play in. Before that, it wasn’t an earlier technology fulfilling this role, it was an earlier place (the shopping mall for social experimentation, bedroom for intimate experimentation; for my generation, there was behind the school bike shed; for my parents, world war two bomb sites are remembered with nostalgia).

So, while it seems to me a great ambition to use digital media to empower today’s youth, at times we are too focused on adult goals in terms of learning and participation, understandable given their apparent failures, and we are too seduced by the apparent coincidence of youthful activities and adult ambitions. It may look superficially as if what young people are doing – engaging, creating, participating – is what adults want them to be doing, that all that’s needed is to nudge them in the right direction.

But there remains little evidence that those adult goals are being attained, as I examine next; and for this I do not blame young people so much as the adult structures which remain persistently closed to or imposed on youth.

How shall we explain what’s going on?

The second point I take from Krotz’ analysis is a reminder to focus on structure as well as agency. This focuses critical questions less on evidence than on theory:

- How shall we explain what we observe?
- What do we identify as the determining factors, the shaping forces?

- Do we celebrate youthful agency while underestimating the institutions and structures that shape children's lives – state, school, family, market.

For me as an audience researcher – remember my days of interviewing families sitting on the sofa – there is an irony here. In the face of an unholy alliance between political economists and popular prejudice, audience researchers sought to defend television viewers against the attack that they were mindless and unthinking, lacking in the reflexivity or critical literacies exemplified by scholars and critics. Informed a particular mix of semiotic, cultural and reception theories, this hermeneutic turn was motivated by a commitment to recognise the value of ordinary experience, to hear from marginalised voices, especially women's, and to inquire into rather than presume about the processes by which social realities are constructed and reproduced.

This research paid off: audiences were shown to confound the authority of supposed textual givens by creating distinctive and multiple interpretations unanticipated by producers but meaningful within their lifeworlds, even enacting individual or collective resistance under the radar through routine acts of tactical evasion. One might say, how much easier to make this case today, when our respondents no longer sit still and silent, demanding all our efforts to interpret their apparently blank gaze as thoughtful and engaged. Now they click and type, moving around and adding to the text on the screen in a way that we can record – their thoughts and engagement are clearly evident. And yes, we should seek to capture and interpret this, as before.¹⁶

But today I suggest we face a different but equally unholy alliance – still involving popular prejudice but now linked not to mass society critics but to network society's optimists, cheered on by technologists, futurologists, controlling states and commercial imperatives. What were once interstitial activities under the radar are now centre stage in state policy, targeted by innovative educational and participatory technology provision; once-marginal fan activities are fuelling big profits; the self-paced trajectory of the individual learner, the radical peer to peer interaction of alternative activists are all being built into the agenda of state and commerce.

I don't mean to advocate a radical position, nor automatically to reject visions of technologically-mediated participation any more than, as an audience researcher, I thought the political economists, and the critical theorists before them, were wrong. Rather, I think we should, as independent scholars, devote a good part of our critical and empirical energies to testing these dominant claims, pondering awkward findings, examining assumptions and imagining alternatives.

In other words, I think academics should seek a contrary position and, in the face of a dominant digital native rhetoric, this leads me to contradict earlier my role as audience researcher. Instead of celebrating young people's creativity or sophistication – though I don't doubt it still exists - I see a value in observing when and how young people lack the skills required to bend technologies to their own ends, or struggle to protect their privacy from intrusive others. Both because this also exists, and because only this way can research argue for the provision of resources for children and young people. Digital natives can get on perfectly well by themselves.

So – what are the problems of institutions, structures and resources faced by young people? Let me illustrate some of the challenges in relation to, first, participation, and then learning.

First, the repeated finding that children engaged in online participation are generally the already-engaged not the newly-motivated. Milly sees the internet as a great means of pursuing her civically engagement. On our project message board she posted this:

<p><i>Message no. ##</i> <i>Posted by MILLY</i> <i>Subject: Re: Email Tony Blair</i></p>

I really don't understand how people could have said that they aren't interested in politics! What about the 'Don't attack Iraq' rallies and marches. There was a massive under-18 turn out. What about the banning of live music without licensing! What about the massive probability that everyone in the UK will have ID cards within the next 5 years! What about national curfews for under 18s!

To find out what's going on, she searches online, to express her political commitments, she joins the appropriate Facebook Group (e.g. against the Iraq war). But when I ask further, I discover her father is a professor of political science. As other research confirms, pre-existing political commitments or their absence shape the nature of internet use more than the digital opportunities do, in and of themselves.

In the *UK Children Go Online* survey, this was confirmed across a national sample of 1500 youth: some explored the internet for many purposes, and this depended on their online skills and confidence; others used the internet for civic purposes, and this depended instead on their prior interests and background. The transfer from the first to the second set of uses was modest.¹⁷

Second, the difficulty of designing resources to encourage the disengaged to start participating: consider the ePal site, produced by the UK government – it has a fun front page, immediately followed by dull pages in list format.¹⁸

Notes on Epal – interviews with producers and teenagers

The producers claimed it is 'about participation in the broadest sense', because services for young people 'need to engage with young people in a participatory way'. When pressed, they could not state what kind of participation they aimed for: 'we're putting lots of bits of fun' in the 'hope that young people will throw lots of stuff at it' so that they can 'check they are hitting the mark'. Such vague expectations regarding engagement contrast with the considerable planning of project funding and design. In such well-meaning statements as, young people 'need to know about a lot more these days to make the right choices', a monologic, top-down vision of communicative is evident.

Teenagers, not surprisingly, resist this approach. Ethan – both internet literate and politicized – complained that Epal is 'so stereotypical' for it assumes that all young people like David Beckham. Samantha – who has made several websites herself – explicitly rejected the generic 'youth' category, for 'you can't really get one [a site] that would please everyone'.

Over and again, the message I heard most often from teenagers is, if we participate, who's listening?¹⁹ What difference will it make? If we think youth participation can make a difference, we still need more evaluations, and we need to tell the youth who don't participate about positive findings. The Epal project was unclear, as seems to be the case for many other projects, as to what youth participation projects are designed to enable participation *in*? Do, and should, they:

- Invite youth to use digital media in their own right, or provide a route for them to change some other domain that affects their lives?
- Reach out to new groups who may be disaffected or alienated, or to provide opportunities for those who are already motivated?
- Enable youth to realize their present rights and responsibilities, or to help them develop the skills they'll need as citizens in the future?
- Connect youth to each other as a peer to peer activity or facilitate connections between youth and adults, with adults (including powerful adults) responding to and acting on youth contributions in a timely, constructive and sustained manner
- Provide resources by which youth can generate their own agenda and pursue their own interests or use the resources to achieve pre-given adult goals or messages?

This last is typical of many publicly funded uses of technology in education as well as civic participation. In relation to learning too, problems of design abound, showing little understanding of children's learning:

Observation in an after-school computer club

10 year old children are playing a maths game on the computer. The task is to navigate a ship around a map of Scotland, calling at two ports on the way. This must be completed within some 90 moves by entering the direction (in degrees) and the distance (in km) for each leg of the journey.

One pair of boys is of one very bright child, as the head teacher describes him, and one very stubborn child, as a teacher passing by confirms. This is a successful combination: with one boy's understanding and the other's determination, after nearly an hour of crashing a few times and playing around a bit and typing in rude words, they eventually succeed. They are rightly pleased with themselves, and have learned something about navigation, direction and distance.

Next to them is a 10-year-old girl working on her own and far less successful. She crashes the boat several times in rapid succession and becomes frustrated. I sit next to her to see if I can help. She hasn't read the instructions and so has missed the importance of the compass. Even when I point this out, she cannot manage this game. Receiving no feedback either from the game itself or from her teacher, she gives up and plays a simpler drawing game instead.

The maths game is an intolerant piece of software – one small mistake and the whole game is lost, no matter how near one is to succeeding and how much effort has been put in. The error message when you crash the boat is always the same, whether this occurs after five minutes through a serious mistake or, frustratingly, after 30 minutes and a very minor mistake. Learning from one's mistakes seems positively impeded rather than enabled by this game and even if the maths had been understood, a simple mistake would crash it entirely.

Not all uses of digital media resemble this, of course, though I am keen that we don't only recognise the successful.

Nyboe and Drotner (2008) describe a school-based Danish animation project that deliberately broke with school routine and teacher-pupil hierarchies in order to enable pupils to co-design a digital animation over a two week period.²⁰

- The researchers observed how pupils' decision-making, design, construction, and implementation all emerged from lively and often playful peer interaction – showing how learning itself is social rather than purely individual, being enabled by discussion, negotiation, imagination and conflict resolution.
- The project proved effective in terms of pupils' learning not only about software, media production, and team working but also in terms of their gaining the media literacy required to analyse and critique the multiplicity of representational forms and knowledge claims that constitute and surround them in daily life.

The contrast between these two observations raises a set of questions about digital learning that parallel my previous list for digital participation: what are digital learning projects designed to enable the *learning of*?

- Are these new ways to learn traditional curriculum materials (as in the maths game) or new ways to learn new things (as in the Danish study)?
- Is the use of digital technology designed to help the less successful or more disadvantaged kids, or will the already-privileged succeed better here too?

- How are we going to assess the knowledge produced by more creative activities, compared with tried and tested means of assessing knowledge of the traditional curriculum? Classroom conditions may be changing but consider rigidity of assessment systems, of further education or university entrance requirements, of employers' expectations of standardised qualifications.
- How shall we go beyond the present findings that evaluations show little is gained from using technology in the traditional curriculum while its use in more innovative curricula has barely been evaluated?²¹
- Do we really expect schools to radically transform their teaching styles and structures – as in the Danish example, or do many parents, employers and policy makers really just want technology to solve present problems with as little disruption as possible?

In whose interest are the changes we observe?

Seeking answers to questions like these brings to me to my final set of critical questions, those which – as Mark Warschauer puts it, “situate technology within the underlying unequal power relationships that exist in society”.²² This goes beyond identifying and explaining the place of digital media within an account of social change to ask whether such changes are or could be democratic, even emancipatory? Or, alternatively, whether they primarily reinforce and extend the interests of established power, state or commercial, rather than those of young people or the wider public.

As Krotz implies in his account of mediatisation, and as Henry Jenkins²³ has also argued, notwithstanding all the excitement, the good reasons for celebrating the creative and expressive, the evident new skills being acquired and enjoyed – this also surely facilitates:

- consumerism (or commodification – via edutainment, the profitability of learning technologies, and the standardisation and marketability of learning outcomes),
- individualisation (as we talk of individual not collective expression, promotion of the self more than community, and enhancement of peer networks at the cost of cross-generational relationships and cultural traditions)
- and, in relation to globalised and ever-extending networks, a new transnational elite that excludes more than it includes, that exacerbates knowledge gaps more than it overcomes them, and that creates new forms of illiteracy as well as literacy?

Let me give one illustration of how a wider gaze reveals the scope for this kind of ideological critique – the recent rise to prominence – at least in Europe but elsewhere too – of media literacy, digital literacy and policies for digital citizenship.

Nearly twenty years ago, Pat Aufderheide was lead author on a report for the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy which generated a definition of media literacy – the ability ‘to access, analyse, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms’ – that has since been widely adopted.²⁴

The UK’s communication regulator took this up when required by law to promote media literacy, though it watered down and redirected the ambitions of Aufderheide et al.²⁵

Ofcom (2004)

“So media literacy is a range of skills including the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce communications in a variety of forms. Or put simply, the ability to operate the technology to find what you are looking for, to understand that material, to have an opinion about it and where necessary to respond to it. With these skills people will be able to exercise greater choice and be able better to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive materials.”

The European Commission's Audiovisual Media Services Directive uses similar terms again, though it further individualised media literacy and also downplays ambitions of participation in favour of protection.²⁶

AVMS (2007)

"Media literacy refers to skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers to use media effectively and safely. Media-literate people will be able to exercise informed choices, understand the nature of content and services and take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies. They will be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive material."

And the UK's Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, explained in 2004 why media literacy is on the policy agenda:

Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport (2004)

"If people can take greater personal responsibility for what they watch and listen to, that will in itself lessen the need for regulatory intervention."

So – a policy of empowerment, as seen by academics, may inform a policy of empowerment for states too; but it may instead be because the neoliberal agenda demands new individualised approaches to governance and risk management, so that markets can be liberalised and barriers to global trade removed. One consequence is the creation of a skills burden on parents, teachers and children, a burden that is likely to fall unequally, as theorized by Beck as the individualization of risk.

In other words, it's not simply digital literacy that's on the agenda but literacy in many guises - financial literacy, scientific literacy, emotional literacy, political literacy, theological literacy, ethical literacy, environmental literacy, information literacy, health literacy.

Media and digital literacy thus has parallels with such questions as:

- Was the financial crash solely caused by the deregulation of financial services or should individuals with failed pension plans also bear some responsibility, lacking financial literacy?
- Should states pay for the health care of smokers and drinkers or is it their fault for lacking health literacy?

In the context of such debates, academics should think carefully about the consequences of their involvement. As Bob McChesney put it – and I quote this as a firm advocate of media literacy – the risk is that a focus on literacy distracts cultural critics from questions of power, for the question is less what people do with the technology than "who will control the technology and for what purpose?"²⁷

Can we, then, advocate efforts to support digital or media literacy among youth without also supporting the neoliberal push to deregulate, knowing the unequal consequences of such deregulation? Should we, knowing this, emphasise that the glass is half empty rather than half full – as I have here – in other words, that youth may not be as sophisticated as supposed and thus in need of resources and interventions. Or, can we be clever in capitalising on the fact that, temporarily at least, critical and state priorities are aligned?

Conclusion

In reflecting critically on the research emerging on digital media learning and participation, I have suggested we should be persistent in asking three kinds of questions:

First, the empirical: what's really going on, is there really a generation transformed, thinking in new ways, more different from previous generations than they are divergent among themselves? In this regard, I suggest there is more support for the gradualists who identify evolutionary not revolutionary change, who emphasise the reconfiguration of identities more than their transformation, remixes and remediations of familiar activities perhaps on a new scale and conducted with a new ease but not wholly new kinds of activity, refashioned styles of learning and participating, but perhaps not or not yet new forms of relationship or institution.

What is clearer to me, however, is that today's youth are the target of widespread criticism, constraint and anxiety. They are, in many ways, a generation under extraordinary scrutiny and even attack. Hence the importance of the *second*, explanatory, form of critique. Although there remains much to be gained from a close observation of the interaction between textual and technological affordances and youthful agency, we also need a wider gaze that encompasses the structures that not only contextualise the shaping and uses of digital media but also condition children's lives more fundamentally.

(Mass media researchers here will recognise the analogue of the text-reader metaphor – powerful in revealing interpretative activity and divergence where none before had been recognised but poor at locating meanings in context or in recognising social determinisms to complement textual ones. Just as the ethnographic turn took audience research away – perhaps too far away – from the person in front of the screen, I am now advocating that we stand back and ask what else is going on – in children's lives, in education, in politics – beyond the intervention of the digital.)

Third, the political or ideological. Here I am uncertain, for where once media scholars – and perhaps those in education, political science, youth culture etc – knew where their critical credentials lay, now these seem clear and I'd like to bring this back into focus, especially as I'm hearing more and more, and myself advocating more and more, the importance of the turn to the normative – what Lars Nyre, quoting McLuhan, calls the shift of academic interest from the Ivory Tower to the Control Tower.²⁸

So, what is our role? Cheerleader for change? What are we losing, as we rush into change? And what new alliances are we forming? In other words, what of our critical and reflexive commitments? Often, scholars have thought themselves better suited to disrupting than building, so where is this new normativity taking us as we seek to reshape rather than undermine?

I do think many people here are right to get stuck into the kinds of interventions – practical or policy-oriented – that might contribute to rather than merely comment on processes of change - especially if these interventions challenge the directions favoured by dominant interests, commercial or state, and especially if they open up ways for more young people to do what they could not do before, even for adults to respond to them in ways that they did not do before. But we should be wary as we do so, making sure we are each others' toughest critics before our ideas are presented as part of a wider debate.

ENDNOTES

¹ To understand this, some of us must be not media-centric but certainly media-centred, and we must then talk to those who are centred elsewhere – grounded in debates over education, politics, family, and so on – and even perhaps as yet unaware of the significance of the digital.

² Livingstone, S. (2009). On the mediation of everything. ICA Presidential address. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1), 1-18.

³ This is, perhaps, less apparent when 'digital' prefixes verbs – learning, participation, networking, for processes are always fluid; it's more a concern when digital prefixes nouns, seeming then to capture all that is important about them; my especial concern here is the notion of digital youth, and its popular counterparts - digital natives, digital generation, digital citizens.

⁴ Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10(3), 393-411.

⁵ Krotz, F. (2007). The meta-process of 'mediatization' as a conceptual frame. *Global Media and Communication*, 3(3), 256-260.

⁶ So, to meet the demands of global capital, digital media are fast becoming infrastructural – taken for granted as an all pervasive backbone of society - in terms of their artefacts (technologies, texts, designs, representations), their associated activities (practices and contexts of use or conditions of interpretation and engagement), and their social arrangements (institutional structures, organisation and governance).

⁷ Livingstone, S. (2005). Critical debates in internet studies: Reflections on an emerging field. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society* (5 ed., pp. 9-28). London: Sage.

⁸ All quotes from empirical work are published in Livingstone, S. (2009). *Children and the Internet: Great Expectations, Challenging Realities*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁹ It may be the case that, as Marc Prensky put it, "Digital natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work.' But this does not mean they all find this easy or satisfying. Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-2.

¹⁰ Ofcom (2009). *Children's Media Literacy Audit: Interim findings*. London: Office of Communications.

¹¹ Nussbaum, E. (06/07/07). Say everything. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/news/features/27341/>.

¹² Beck, U. (1986/2005). *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.

¹³ So, in celebrating youthful creativity we must be wary of generating new (or old) ideals of youth that, being both unsustainable and partial, leave out the messy and contradictory realities that, in fact, permit more a more sanguine attitude to low levels of protection and intervention.

¹⁴ Livingstone, S. and Helsper, E.J. (in press) Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the internet: The role of online skills and family context. *New Media & Society*, 11(6).

¹⁵ Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., boyd, d., Cody, R., Herr-Stephenson, B., Horst, H., Lange, P., Mahendran, D., Martínez, K., Pascoe, C., Perkel, D., Robinson, L., Sims, C., & Tripp, L. (2010) *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New*

Media. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

¹⁶ Livingstone, S. (2004). The challenge of changing audiences: Or, what is the audience researcher to do in the internet age? *European Journal of Communication*, 19(1), 75-86.

¹⁷ Livingstone, S., Bober, M., & Helsper, E. J. (2005). Active participation or just more information? Young people's take up of opportunities to act and interact on the internet. *Information, Communication and Society*, 8(3), 287-314.

¹⁸ Livingstone, S. (2007) The challenge of engaging youth online: Contrasting producers' and teenagers' interpretations of websites. *European Journal of Communication*, 22(2), 165-184.

¹⁹ Coleman, S. (2007). E-democracy: The history and future of an idea. In D. Quah, R. Silverstone, R. Mansell & C. Avgerou (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies* (pp. 362-382). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁰ Nyboe, L., & Drotner, K. (2008). Identity, aesthetics and digital narration. In K. Lundby (Ed.), *Mediatized Stories*. New York: Peter Lang.

²¹ Livingstone, S. (forthcoming) From page to screen? Critical reflections on the prospects for ICT in education. *Oxford Review of Education*.

²² Warschauer, M. (2003). *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. pp. 203.

²³ Jenkins, H. (2003). *Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars?* Digital cinema, media convergence, and participatory culture. In D. Thorburn & H. Jenkins (Eds.), *Rethinking Media change: The Aesthetics of Transition* (pp. 281-312). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²⁴ Aufderheide, P. (1993). *Media Literacy: A Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*. Aspen, CO.: Aspen Institute.

²⁵ Ofcom. (2004). *Ofcom's Strategy and Priorities for the Promotion of Media Literacy: A Statement*. London: Office of Communications.

²⁶ For this and subsequent policy quotes, see Livingstone, S. (2008). Engaging with media – a matter of literacy? *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 1(1), 51-62.

²⁷ McChesney, R. W. (1996). The internet and U.S. communication policy-making in historical and critical perspective. *Journal of Communication*, 46(1), 98-124. pp.100.

²⁸ Nyre, L. (2009) Normative media research: Moving from the Ivory Tower to the Control Tower. *Nordicom Review* 30 (2009) 2: 3-17.