

Editorial

Some Reflections on Media Research With Children

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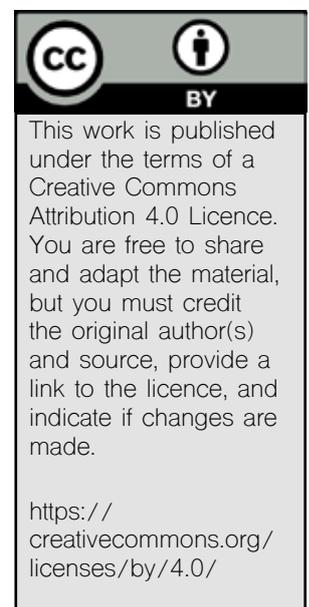
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Children's media use, has become an increasingly important focus for researchers over the past decade or so. There has been a shift away from seeing them as merely recipients of media texts and technologies, to acknowledging their subjective media experiences and agency. In other words, academic research is now fully invested in seeking to understand the complex dynamic relationships between children and the media. This, of course, is often inevitably bound up with literacy practices, learning and pedagogy.

This issue of *MERJ* is not the first to focus on children's media practices – the last was in 2019 – but technologies, platforms and modes of engagement are moving so rapidly that it seemed timely to commission articles from international scholars in the field; we include pieces by academics from Israel, Hong Kong, Portugal, Norway, Finland the Czech Republic, Denmark, the USA and Austria. The recent global pandemic is another factor which makes this issue timely – the necessary move to online created a range of opportunities, threats and further complexities for both researchers and children.

The guest editors of *MERJ* 8.2 in the pre-pandemic days of 2019 comment that the papers in that issue: “reflect a shared need to think deeply and critically about the myriad issues relating to the role of digital devices and media texts in the lives of very young children...Doubtless, ongoing research has an important role to play in establishing a bridge between children's media experiences and their experience of



media in schools. In addition, it has the potential to signal opportunities for new and dynamic ways of using digital tools to create innovative pedagogic spaces for young children” (Parry et al., pp. 7-8).

The articles collected in this current issue of *MERJ* represent this ongoing research into children’s experiences with media. They are all underpinned by concerns about equity, literacy, how young people might make sense of and benefit from the proliferation of technologies and communication possibilities that now exist, and how parents and educators might support them. The perspectives and approaches in this issue are diverse in terms of theoretical orientation and empirical practice, exploring a variety of topics relevant to children’s media experience and media literacy learning over the entire course of their childhood, from 0–18. The papers share a child-centred perspective and collectively address children’s home, school, and third-space media experiences, while questioning roles that media, culture, and most importantly social interactions, play and could play in children’s literacy (in its broadest sense) and learning. Ranging from pragmatic issues, such as developing, testing, and funding media literacy interventions, to the questions of aims, strategies, and outcomes, the overarching focus on children’s empowerment and wellbeing remains the same.

As co-editors of this issue we now reflect on some of the issues raised, some of the shifts in emphasis we have witnessed, and some of the implications for future media research with young people.

Mark Readman: Obviously the phenomenon that’s had the biggest impact on children’s media use in past few years is the Covid pandemic, during which most workers and children in industrialised parts of the world were driven online, and the shadow of the pandemic looms over many of the contributions to this issue. Christine and Sascha Trültzsch-Wijnen’s work, for example, focuses explicitly on children’s media use during the pandemic. They do an admirable job of accessing and representing children’s voices, but the picture they paint is a rather sad one in which children were deprived of a whole dimension of their social lives during the Covid period. It’s also interesting how this slightly contradictory picture emerges of children who are, in many ways, amazingly adroit with digital technologies, yet also vulnerable to technological deprivation and to online risks. I found myself wondering whether the door to the ‘protectionist agenda’ was still ajar – what do you think?

Markéta Supa: Empowerment and protection of children in, and through, media education research and practice are two sides of the same coin as Reneé Hobbs once said. Yet there seem to be cycles of dominance. In light of the pandemic, wars, propaganda, fake news, and the spread of misinformation, the protectionist agenda now, once again, slightly overshadows the importance of children’s creative and

playful media engagements and their learning opportunities. Yet this is not the case of papers in this issue. For instance, Christine and Sascha put a lot of effort into exploring and illustrating the complexity of children's everyday media experiences during the pandemic. They discuss the risks as well as opportunities associated with media and digital technologies the children in Austria encountered during the first lockdown, and ask how media literacy skills were developed, as well as how they could have been developed more substantially, and also if parents and teachers developed their own media literacy awareness.

MR: Yes, it's interesting that both Christine and Sascha, and our contributors from Israel – Yehuda Barlev, Nelly Elias and Dafna Lemish – all end up concluding that it's the adults that need to do the work in order to understand how children are using the media. This is a much more demanding and complicated task than simply limiting access or seeking technological 'fixes'. Both articles talk about how not just parents, but teachers too, need support, enhanced awareness, and greater literacy. They recognise that technology is part of children's lives from the very beginning and, therefore, children have an apparent 'fluency', but that this fluency should not be mistaken for full critical literacy. I wonder if the respective authors' advocacy of better media/digital literacy for parents might enable their children to have greater understanding of the 'water' in which they 'swim'.

MS: That's the argument from Yehuda Barlev et al. certainly. Based on their longitudinal qualitative research with children from the age of three months to two years old and their parents, the authors argue for instructive and technological parental mediation that can support children's healthier and richer media experiences. What I especially appreciate is their emphasis on toddlers' independence, sense of achievement, and personal agency that all need to be truly taken into account in the process. The first thing I did after reading the paper was teach my 2-year-old how to control the volume on the touchpad! As they argue, children shouldn't be mistaken for tech savvy "digital natives". The approach to early parental mediation they propose is, however, significantly more profound than this. It can provide children of all ages with more and greater opportunities for moving from the bare survival in the water to a more agentic and content life, while potentially also contributing to a better parent-child relationship.

MR: That's a great distinction – it's kind of Maslovian (Maslow, 1943) – the difference between survival and flourishing. I think I can detect a continuing tension in research done with/about children – I don't know if the two sides are irreconcilable, but if the dialogue continues I think it could be fruitful. It's something that is explicit in Cary Bazalgette's book review, but it's also inherent in Reijo Kupiainen's advocacy of teaching metacognition as an essential component of critical media literacy. Reijo cites Kristiina Kumpulainen, who had a piece in *MERJ* 8.2

about Finland's promotion of 'multiliteracies' – an approach which acknowledges and values children's existing 'funds of knowledge' – but Reijo argues for a greater, more systematic critical engagement with literacy, proposing a model which reminds me of Marcia Baxter-Magolda's (1992) work on 'contextual knowing'. Sometimes the notion of multiliteracies, and the attendant celebration of non-standard modes of engaging with and creating representations of the world, seems to co-exist quite happily with arguments for critical literacy, but at other times the latter finds the former lacking political heft, and ignoring the significance of cultural capital. Reijo seems keen to encourage children to be philosophers of knowledge – how possible do you think this is?

MS: Very possible when it comes to children's potential. Ever since reading John White's book *Exploring Wellbeing in Schools: A Guide to Making Children's Lives More Fulfilling* (2011) and listening to his talks about the value of philosophy for children, I believe that an understanding of knowledge and knowing can impact children's immediate and future wellbeing. Reijo introduces a framework of critical literacy that is based on the theory of epistemic cognition, which is relevant to any child using, and thus learning from, the Internet. He clearly argues and shows examples of how even young children use epistemic cognition in their literacy and digital practices. Although the level of epistemic cognition might be to some degree dependent on age and developmental stage, he stresses that the progression and the achievement of the higher levels should be nurtured as it does not happen automatically. So, as with Yehuda, Nelly and Dafna's paper, as well as Kristiina's article, the aim is to start building the foundation from an early age and then continuing to support children throughout their lives, so they can fulfil their potential and be more in control of their media experiences and learning. Patrícia Dias and her colleagues' mixed method research with 10-to-17-year-olds also contributes to our knowledge about children's control over their media experience, but rather from a different angle, wouldn't you say?

MR: I thought their work was a really nice way of navigating the path between 'critical engagement' and 'creativity' (it's a crude and unsustainable binary, but let's leave it here as a kind of placeholder). The focus on so-called 'influencer marketing' reveals that the young participants in the research have enormous knowledge and expertise – they understand the codes and conventions of influencers and they have refined aesthetic sensibilities. But the research tells us that the young people in their survey had very little understanding of the political economy of the digital ecosystem and, for the authors (and I agree), this understanding is an essential component of media literacy. If young people are aware of the political and economic determinants on media phenomena (this seems like a better word than 'texts' now!) then their understanding, interpretation and responses will be inflected and informed differently.

MS: In some ways this is like a return to first principles of Media Studies - Len Masterman (1990) would have approved! Donna Chu's work also relates to the question of 'determinants', albeit in a slightly different way.

MR: Definitely. I like the way in which she makes explicit the challenges of delivering media literacy teaching to young people when it is only possible to do it when the workshops are funded by a 'client'. She makes it clear that in the Hong Kong context, where there is no formal provision of media literacy in schools, she has needed to offer it via a 'social media enterprise', run like a public service business, but this has created a great opportunity to understand how the different stakeholders perceive the importance of the work. There's a sense of frustration at the end of her article when she talks about how media literacy should be seen as a public good and funded accordingly.

MS: Donna really provides a rather unusual but important view on media education of children and youth as 'public service'. Laura Sinclair's research report is also about public service, but she focuses on children's learning about gender roles from preschool public service broadcasting television programmes. Her research calls back to that fundamental media studies exercise of textual analysis and highlights what she calls 'encouraging' yet still limited progress in gender representation in children's media.

MR: Yes, it's interesting to see that in her analysis it's possible to identify persistent gender tropes, despite some obvious attempts on the part of broadcasters to respond to a cultural climate which has shifted radically in the last 13 years. I'm looking forward to the next part of the research in which she explores how children make sense of these representations - this was always the criticism of textually-oriented work - that it didn't follow up with actual audiences and especially not children!

MS: Klaus Thestrup, in his article about the 'experimenting community', in attempting to reconcile play with the sort of cognitive engagement we talked about earlier, really 'follows up' with children as you say. Through a critical reflection he combines theories of children's culture and play with his own first-hand experience of being involved in the projects conducted with pre-school and school-age children. He asks how the whole community can support young children through play and experimentation to use digital media and technologies in creative and cooperative ways.

MR: Yes, there are a lot of dimensions to Klaus's work - radical pedagogy, play cultures, communities of practice, creative collaboration, third and other interstitial spaces, and conscious reflection on all these. The playful 'mashups', remixes and fusion of physical and digital spaces have a utopian quality when they are grounded in such a challenge to pedagogic orthodoxy, which I always find seductive. I think you're

right, if these kindergartens, schools and pre-schools are not only using technology to connect with each other, but also to transform learning and collaborative processes this is powerful stuff. Also powerful is the terminology – the idea that ideas and creative collaborative production is always a process of enquiry and discovery – Klaus conjures up that sense of constant flux with occasional equilibrium, and decentres the teacher by recasting her as a ‘participator’. There’s also a sense of claiming the scientific language of ‘experimentation’ and ‘laboratory’ in order to make it clear that young people can be active agents of knowledge production if the conditions of possibility are right.

MS: Connection and collaboration between children is also the topic of the paper my colleagues and I wrote with Patricia Ramsey in which we explore how children could be encouraged to civically engage with the use of media through the combination of media and multicultural education. Patricia is probably less well-known in media literacy circles, because her main focus is on children’s early attitude development, awareness and understanding of racial and social class differences, and multicultural education. Our team was thrilled to have her on board as a consultant for our applied research and as a co-author with us, as she can pick and choose what she works on these days.

MR: What I really liked about your paper was the fusion of ‘mediated imagination’ with physical collaborative activities, so you looked at the potency of children working on ‘social justice themes’ while actually having to collaborate, negotiate, and consider the feelings of each other. I think the ‘superhero’ angle is ingenious, and it clearly elicited some profound thinking. Your research project seems very close to one of Klaus’s ‘Experimenting Communities’ in that sense. And I think his experimenting communities also correspond with some of the case studies in Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell’s *Living Literacies*, which is reviewed by Cary Bazalgette in this issue. Cary was already a key figure in media education when I started teaching in the early 90s so, like you with Patricia Ramsey, I was delighted to have her contribution to this issue. Her provocative piece challenges us to think about the links between literacy and actual political and economic power, and I was struck by her impatience with what we might call the ‘postmodern turn’ in literacy studies. To what extent is this legitimate do you think? To what extent does the recent enthusiasm for ‘multiliteracies’ neglect ‘traditional’ notions of literacy? And does it matter?

MS: I think it does matter – we need to keep checking our own work and the work of others to see what’s at stake in the arguments and positions. I have to say I really enjoyed reading *Living Literacies* and I’m also looking forward to reading Cary’s new book *How Toddlers Learn the Secret Language of Movies* – there’s room for different approaches as long as the knowledge claims are appropri-

ate. I do understand Cary's frustration though, as I'm sometimes guilty of focusing on children's lived experience when I do 'literacy work', at the expense of essential literacy skills. Much of the work in this issue is interdisciplinary, context-dependent and adopts a plural approach to literacies, but all the authors share some common ground – namely the wish for equality and children's wellbeing.

MR: That's certainly true – the desire to carry out research which contributes to our understanding of children and young people's meaning-making activities with a view to bringing about their wellbeing and agency is shared by all of our contributors. The differences emerge in the interpretations of different activities and the emancipatory claims that are made on the basis of these. We might, for example, recognise that children's play is a rich and complex developmental activity, but what do we do with that understanding? Do we acknowledge it and move on, or see an opportunity to develop children's 'play knowledge' through facilitation and guidance, which is what I think the recent Digital Futures Commission report (2021) is advocating. I think Cary is suggesting that the risk with just celebrating and demanding recognition of different literacies is that we neglect the very real and tangible affordances of traditional literacies.

MS: It's always useful and interesting to 'take the temperature' in a particular field as we have done with this issue. What are your thoughts about the directions it sets for future media education theory, research, and practice?

MR: There are some really valuable future pointers in this issue – I'll select a few, but with the caveat that they're my own interests too! I think the 'political economy' angle which we've talked about already (and which perhaps dropped out of fashion when the post-modern seductions of pleasure and plurality dominated) is both crucial for media (literacy) education and its attendant research. As we've seen, this is not something that needs to be restricted to higher-level education, and interventionist research projects can both illuminate current understanding and generate new understanding.

One big challenge to the field is that it is increasingly difficult to separate the 'media' bit of media education research now that the division between private and public is so blurred, so I find myself returning to the notion of 'media ecology' (Postman, 1993) – we can see in some of the articles in this issue how children (and we) live our lives within media environments and how important it is, therefore, to understand our always-mediated existence.

And finally (with another bang up to date reference!) I think some of the work in this issue opens the door for more work broadly in the area of Freirean 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1996). Perhaps it's

because we're living through a period of global 'rolling catastrophe' that it seems more urgent than ever to address problems, inequalities, develop strategies for change and, crucially, understand the conditions that produce these problems through conscious and critical reflection. This is not just 'media literacy', or media education research, or critical literacy, but it can be all of these. It is, however, always about knowledge production, and this should be at the root of both education and research, otherwise what's the point?

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