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CHILD STUDIES MEETS DIGITAL MEDIA

Rethinking the Paradigms

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Introduction

Children are often the focus of much public concern regarding the impacts of digital culture. A quick google search on digital media and children lists links to websites that make such claims as children are: addicted to screens, bullied online, obsessed with social media, corrupted by online pornography, and in danger of ruining their reputations. Stories abound of the perils of the digital for children, as if children are unwitting victims of this new technology. These refrains echo the sentiments of technological determinism as if, somehow, this technology is colonising and controlling children.

These statements reveal as much about societal anxieties of digital culture as they do about definitions of contemporary childhood, and by extension adulthood. Each of these same refrains could easily be made with regards to adults, but it is most often children that are deemed to be susceptible to the internet’s dangers. While there are many ways that these arguments can be unpacked and critiqued, they do reveal some of the ways in which society defines, frames, and knows young people. Understanding why these debates often become centred on children begins with basic ontological questions, including what is a child and what is childhood? Who gets to be defined as children, and who are not defined as children? And, as Jenks has suggested, “how is the child possible as such?” (Jenks, 2005, p. 4): a question that explores why children are defined in these ways, and what this reveals about society. How society defines and frames the child and childhood has major implications for how it understands the digital child, what voices they are given, how their relationships with technology are understood, and which children are framed in these debates and which are not.

The child that is held up in these fearful refrains of technology is not an actual child, but an image of a child that fits the ideological logics of the rhetoric of the arguments. There is a distinction between the imagined child that is framed as an ‘unwitting victim’ of this technology and the lived experiences of the estimated 2.2 billion children in the world (UNICEF, 2017).

Research on children and digital culture needs to take into account what the term child actually means. Of course, the embodied child always becomes the constructed child, once it is positioned within discourse. But what does the term ‘child’ actually mean in the context of digital media and children? The purpose of this chapter is to begin to unpack the cultural, social discursiveness of the terms child, children, and childhood, and think critically about how these terms are employed.
History of Children as a Construction

Perhaps one of the best starting points in unpacking the concept of the child is the work of Philippe Ariès. Emerging in the 1960s, Ariès’ scholarship incited a debate on the ‘invention of the child’. Phillipe Ariès’ work *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1965) suggests that childhood, as a meaningful concept, is an invention of the emerging modern society. Prior to this, Ariès contends, childhood was not recognised or valued as a distinct phase of life. Despite the fact that scholars such as Lawrence Stone and Natalie Zemon Davis have suggested that Ariès’ work is methodologically flawed (see Wilson, 1980), his research opened up the possibility of thinking about children and childhood as a social construct and not a natural, universal category of being. While Ariès is largely credited with initiating this debate, earlier scholars have also pushed against the reification of childhood. Consider, for example, Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (2017), originally published in 1943, which suggested that adolescence is shaped by social and cultural conditions. But it was Ariès’ work in the 1960s that was foundational in establishing that child, children, and childhood are not universal concepts; instead they are constituted discursively within the social, cultural, political, and economic institutions and structures of a historical moment.

At the heart of these lines of thinking is the debate around the role of culture in shaping categories of being. The child is a social and cultural construction constituted through discourse. It is not a natural category of being, determined solely by biological stages of development. Nor is it a universal category that is fixed and remains unchanging across historical and cultural boundaries. Instead, childhood, as Henry Jenkins suggests:

> is not timeless but rather subject to the same historical shifts and institutional factors that shape all human experience. Children’s culture is not the result of purely top-down forces of ideological and institutional control, nor is it a free space of individual expression. Children’s culture is a site of conflicting values, goals and expectations.

(1998, p. 14)

Jenkins highlights the complex tensions at play. The child is a discursive and social construction, and the meanings of childhood are in constant processes of struggle and negotiation, in both public discourse and in interpersonal relationships.

This is not to deny that there are biological realities of the stages of childhood, nor that biology plays a role in the framing of young people. But it is to assert, instead, that the biological realities of this stage of life are named, given meaning, and understood discursively. To quote Jenks, the child is “a status of person which is comprised through a series of, often heterogeneous, images, representations, codes and constructs” (Jenks, 2005, p. 29). The notion of a child is not merely illusionary, however. The definition of the child has real-life consequences that are felt deeply by those who are defined as children. Nor is the definition of the child fixed, stable, or even an objective definition, but is, instead, in a perpetual process of change, mutating alongside other social and cultural shifts, often according to the needs and logics of adult institutions such as the church, the government, the schools, and even the media.

Vivian Zelizer’s work *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1994) provides a poignant example of Jenks’ quote as it reveals the changing relationships between the economic value of children and their sociocultural worth. Zelizer traces a complex social trajectory of how childhood changed in meaning around the end of the 19th century and early 20th century when the sacred/sentimental child displaced the worker/labourer child. Zelizer shows how childhood as a social construct is tied to an array of social, political, economic, and cultural factors, which are all implicated in framing and defining childhood in very particular ways, with dramatic results for the lives of...
actual children. For example, as Zelizer highlights, shifts in constructions of children as paid labourers, and the types of children desired for adoption (from work-ready boys to sentimentalised baby girls), have real consequences for those children. The discursive ties between childhood and labour are again a shifting ground in digital culture. Scholarship by Crystal Abidin (2015) on babies as microcelebrities (famous within small niche networks) and Alicia Blum-Ross’s work on ‘sharenting’ (share-parenting) (2015) opens up new questions about how the curation of children’s digital images are leveraged as digital capital for an intimate public in the digital economy.

The child that is framed in the opening refrains of this chapter, the one who is ‘addicted’, ‘coerced’, etc., fits an assumption of children as not having developed the tools to successfully negotiate digital culture: the corresponding assumption is that adults have these skills. The child is often “locked within binary reasoning”, in which the child is being conditioned or socialised to become an adult (Jenks, 2005, p. 3). Childhood is a processional stage of becoming, towards an ambiguously defined notion of adult as the full completion of the processes. Such framings assume that childhood is presocial, in a teleological process of becoming adult, and not in a liminal stage of being.

The children in these narratives are deemed as being influenced or ‘effected’ – both brought into being and impacted, or not (Gauntlett, 1998), by digital technology. Children are not considered social actors who engage in meaning-making practices themselves (Cook, 2011; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Jenks, 2005). Nor do these narratives address the diverse and complex ways in which different children engage with digital media. Instead, in these narratives, childhood is conceptualised as a period of mostly powerlessness. The child, presumed innocent and devoid of social agency, is considered to be ‘immature’, ‘irrational’ (Jenkins, 1998, p. 2), and vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation.

These framings position childhood as inherently separate from the media, where the media is seen as somehow external to childhood and children’s everyday lives (Buckingham, 2018, p. iii). This slips quickly into assumptions of media effects, where the media is conceptualised as having a direct impact on children’s consciousness and behaviour. Such understandings are too simplistic; not only do they posit the child as having very little agency, they also assume that childhood is experienced separately or externally from digital media (Buckingham, 2018, p. iii), as opposed to appreciating how children’s lives are deeply engaged with digital media. The media are not separate from children’s lives, but are instead embedded within the practices of children’s everyday experiences. Children are actively engaged with digital media, as they consume, use, respond to, resist, are influenced by, negotiate, and produce digital media as part of their daily activities. Digital media is not something external to childhood but is integrated within children’s lives.

The scholarship in the rest of this book builds upon the theoretical framings of critical childhood studies that conceptualise the child as a social and historical construct, born out of a multi-dimensional network of social forces, institutional regimes, economic demands, and historical developments. While these constitutions often serve the needs of adult-centred social, cultural, political, and economic systems, young people are not completely passive; they are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live” (James & Prout, 2003, p. 8). Young people are active agents of change. They do not simply respond to narratives provided by media culture but instead actively participate in the construction of their own subjectivities and practices.

Paradigms of Scholarship

As a starting point in the scholarship on digital media and children, it is helpful to turn to the work of Allison James and Alan Prout (2003, 2015) whose foundational texts offer deep insight into research on the child. In the mid-1990s Prout and James established a new paradigm for the
sociology of childhood. The authors outline six key features of this paradigm, which will all be individually explored in the following section. Each of these six features provide useful starting points for thinking about children and digital media.

The first feature of the paradigm is that “childhood is understood as a social construction”. It is an “interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life”. While this chapter has already started to address this idea, there is more to add in specific relation to children and digital media. With digital media there are multiple perspectives, structures, and institutions that discursively construct the child. Digital media is embedded in capitalism, which is perhaps one of the key institutions to define childhood in the past century and which is largely dominated by multinational organisations. Daniel Cook’s work on the child in the marketplace provides a useful starting point to reflect upon the social constructions of childhood. Cook argues that the child is defined, articulated, and framed according to the logics and needs of the marketplace. The child is a “figment of the commercial imagination” produced to meet the needs of the cultural industries of children (advertising, marketing, media, retail, and technology) as these industries research, target, and trade their knowledge of children and youth and vie for children’s attention in the marketplace (Cook, 2004, p. 7). In his later work, Cook calls these the “commercial epistemologies”, the ways of ‘knowing’ about children and youth that serve the interests and needs of the ‘knower’ (2011, p. 258). Alluding to the ideological constructions of childhood, Cook’s work provides a useful insight into understanding the discursive forces of capitalism. In digital capitalism, much of the ‘knowing’ about young people depends upon data mining and surveillance of young people online in order to harness young people as potential customers, users, creators, and audiences of digital media.

Social media platforms, digital games, and internet-connected toys produce endless reams of data that can be instantaneously harvested or mined by corporations. This data is often then curated, commodified, and sold to third-party advertisers and becomes the means by which audiences are understood, defined, and framed. This process is a commercial epistemology, in which the digital child is known only through and according to the logics of data mining, which functions as a means to create profit. The process of data mining of children’s digital spaces was noticed in the early stages of digital media. In 2005, before the development of most social media platforms, Sara Grimes and Leslie Regan Shade (2005) called out how seemingly benign children’s digital games, such as Neopets, were in reality data-mining platforms gathering data on their players to sell to market research companies. A year earlier in 2004, Ellen Seiter observed that Neopets wasn’t selling a media product, instead it was “selling information about the children and young adults who are its fans” (p. 98). These scholars, along with the early work of Sonia Livingstone (2003) and Juliet Schor (2004), raised awareness of how digital media was in the business of harvesting data well before scholars such as Mark Andrejevic (2007) and Christian Fuchs (2010) took notice and began to explore how users/followers perform unpaid labour in the workings of digital capitalism (although Tatiana Terranova had begun to write about free labour in 2000 and Greg Elmer wrote about data profiling in 2004).

It is important to note this trajectory of scholarship. Scholars of children’s digital media were recognising early on the exploitive nature of digital media, and yet most of their work has been left out of current scholarship on digital labour. Take Trebor Scholz’s foundational edited collection, *Digital Labour: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (2012), which completely ignores children. The absence of children from wider debates on digital media, privacy, and free labour continues today, although hopefully this edited collection will begin to address the marginalisation of children’s digital cultures from the wider field.

A more recent example of children’s digital media raising the flag on wider issues with regards to digital culture, in that it addresses worries about internet-connected smart toys (see Holloway & Green, 2016), has drawn attention to concerns surrounding data surveillance by corporations,
privacy issues, geolocation and tracking, and the digital hacking of other technologies included in the internet of things.

Returning to the original paradigm discussed in this section, that childhood is a social construction, recent scholarship in children’s studies suggests that it is not just the discursive that frames the child, but the material (James & Prout, 2015). Drawing upon the theoretical frames of posthumanism and new materialism as a way to move beyond the limitations of social construction, and the subject/object and agency/structure binaries (see Prout, 2011), this newer work acknowledges the affective entanglements of young people with material objects and assemblages. Instead of setting the subject apart from the material, posthumanism insists upon the importance of material encounters, as the child is relational, in process, and constituted by conceptual and material forces (Murris, 2017).

The second paradigmatic feature considers childhood as a “variable of social analysis that cannot be divorced from such variables as class, gender or ethnicity” (Prout & James, 2003, p. 8). Prout and James call for research that is intersectional, comparative, and cross-cultural to reveal a diverse childhood instead of a singular universal phenomenon (2003). The child is never solely an aged subjectivity, childhood is lived as an intersectional subjectivity.

The child that is often understood within digital culture and media is an imagined global child who is often Western, due largely to the discursive impact of the dominance of multinational corporations in the digital mediascape. As Dafna Lemish has argued, in regards to the production of content (both digital and analog) for the international marketplace, there is a tendency to erase the cultural symbols and signs that mark a children’s text as foreign or national, to produce the “neutral grounds of global culture” (in Chan, Lemish, McMillin, & Parameswaran, 2013, p. 213). This perceived neutrality is based on an imagined global child and a universalising notion of childhood (Hogan & Sienkiewicz, 2013) that emerges from corporations’ need to sell content globally. The universal child (who is predominately constructed as a Western middle-class boy) allows global corporations to justify the sale of one program to dozens of nations. As Havens (2007) notes, this “myth of a global child” essentialises childhood, implying that there are unified tastes and desires of children that make it feasible to sell across a multitude of local markets. Such discourse homogenises young people as gendered and aged consuming subjects to the exclusion of collective and regional subjective experiences (Buckingham, 2011; Wise, 2008).

A similar discursive bias can be seen in children’s rights. Boyden asks, in the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), whose rights are being addressed? And, in whose interests are the best interests of the child being addressed? Boyden suggests that the view of childhood is Western and it is a European conception of childhood that is exported to the Global South. Its values are white, urban, and middle class (Boyden, 2003). To rectify these types of biases, Prout and James call on scholarship to be intersectional, to see the child as more than a gendered and aged subject. This child, and the lived experiences of children, are intersectionally intertwined with a child’s race, sexuality, socio-economic status, and geographic locale. James and Prout call for us to think of childhoods, not childhood, by pushing for a world view of childhood that is a comparative, historical, cross-cultural analysis of a variety of childhoods, and not just a simple, single phenomenon (2003, p. 4).

The third feature of the paradigm for a new sociology of childhood argues that “children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults” (Prout & James, 2003, p. 8). This is particularly relevant in regards to children and digital media as children’s content is often evaluated from the perspective of adults. A common concern about children’s digital media is that the content is ‘bad’ and of poor quality. Terms like vacuous, silly, and ridiculous are often bandied about when adults comment on children watching the latest YouTube videos from Ryan’s Toys (over 1.1 billion views at the time of writing) or Sophia Grace (583 million views). Deeming children’s content to be
‘bad’ suggests that children need to be protected from themselves – from the consequences of their own dubious tastes and uncultured desires. The assumption seems to be that, left to their own desires, children would naturally consume vulgar, sensational content with simplistic stereotypes (Davies, Buckingham, & Kelley, 2000). Adult assumptions about children’s content often reveal more about adult culture than children’s culture. Disparaging children’s cultural consumption is an act of power that works to perpetuate and reinforce distinctions between the child and the adult, often reinscribing adult culture as the ‘valued’ culture.

Allison James’ work on children’s candy argues that children’s attraction to content that is deemed as poor by adult culture can be a small act of resistance. Consuming and enjoying that which is judged as not having value is a means for children to forge alternative systems of meaning, reinterpret social models, and semantically reorder adult signs (James, 1998, p. 394). James’ work here reminds us of the need for scholarship on the child and digital media that recognises “children’s agency in constructing and defining their own tastes and identities” (Davies et al., 2000, p. 8). Digital content is often more complex than it might appear to be on the surface. Patricia Lange’s (2014) work on YouTube, for example, reveals the collaborative social networks that young people use to negotiate identity and develop digital literacies, even in content that is disparaged. Digital media is a space for young people to make and remake meaning, often in contention with the adult world. Scholarship on young people and digital media needs to reveal these creative processes of interdependence between child and adult cultures.

The fourth feature of the paradigm states that children are “active in the construction and determination of their own lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live” (Prout & James, 2003, p. 8). This feature reminds us that children are not “passive subjects of social structures and processes” and, it could be added, “materialities”, but are active participants. Children are social actors and are part of culture, not a precursor to culture (James & Prout, 2003, p. vii). The opening refrains of this chapter that position children as ‘obsessed with’, ‘bullied on’, and ‘corrupted by’ digital media do not consider the child as agentive. The child in such framing is passive and manipulated by technological forces. Nor do these frames recognise that children and children’s culture actually help shape and direct the way digital media is organised and functions.

Children are creators of digital content, from producing videos on YouTube to building online games. They often create content in ways that challenge and contest the limited and limiting options provided by corporate entities. Young people also find ways to “appropriate digital media to find spaces of personal autonomy while their parents and teachers try to deploy digital media normatively to shape young people’s present achievements and future prospects” (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016, p. 56). Children can demonstrably shape the way content is circulated online and the means through which it is monetised, effectively impacting the political and economic structures of digital platforms. But more work needs to be done on how young people’s participation in digital media influences the workings of digital capitalism.

On the flip side of recognising children as agentive within the political economic structures of digital media, there is a danger of romanticising children’s agency, or celebrating them as ‘digital natives’, a narrative that has been highly critiqued. Work on young people needs to balance the notion that children have agency but also recognise the deep constraints on children’s participation as they are beholden to structures that are often designed, created, and policed without their input. As Livingstone and Haddon note, children’s activities can be highly constrained both online, through the design of platforms and websites for example, and offline through the constraining role of families, communities, and schools (2012).

Feature five of the paradigm calls for methodological approaches that give children a direct voice and active participation in the production of data (Prout & James, 2003). Allison James suggests that the true nature of the culture of childhood is often hidden from adults (1998).
Scholarship on and with young people must take a ‘child-centred approach’ which identifies children’s experiences, voices, and actions, and then contextualises these within the concentric circles of structuring social influences, such as the family, community, and culture (Livingstone & Haddon, 2012). For Prout and James, this requires ethnographic research methods as opposed to “experimental or survey styles of research” (2003, p. 8). A recent example of an excellent ethnography in scholarship on children and digital media is Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green’s work *The Class* (2016), which tracked a group of students over three semesters as a way of challenging existing assumptions by the adult world of policymakers, parents, and educators, about young people’s digital worlds.

Currently, innovative strategies are being explored to ‘decolonise’ childhood research by positioning children as co-researchers or collaborators in the research process, and understand children as aware of their own worlds. Drawing from postcolonial research (see Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), these strategies acknowledge the power dynamics of positioning the child as a data subject of an adult researcher, and offer alternative methodological practices based on collaboration. Digital technologies allow for new forms of creative methods, such as photo voice techniques, that utilise the digital competencies of children as active researchers in their own digital lives (see Thomson, Berriman, & Bragg, 2018).

Another methodological possibility is to use a phenomenological approach to understand how young people are living contemporary lives in digital spaces. Poyntz and Kennelly suggest that phenomenology “permits the focus of meaning-making to rest with the experiences of youth themselves within the context of a much larger historical frame” (2015, p. 3). Using a methodological approach that incorporates children’s voices, perspectives, opinions, and experiences about digital media is an important methodological tool in counteracting the narrow and limiting arguments of digital media as a corrupting force on children, as outlined in the opening paragraphs of this chapter.

For the sixth and last feature of this paradigm, Prout and James acknowledge that the new sociology of childhood is complicit in its own reproduction. It is a double hermeneutic, they suggest. To proclaim a new paradigm of childhood is to discursively reconstruct the child. Extending this to digital media means that to begin research on children and digital media from the position that childhood is a social construction, separate from the realities of the living child, discursively frames the child. This is a reminder that the social sciences are not “neutral commentaries on children [and childhood] but active factors in its construction and reconstruction” (Prout & James, 2003, p. 29). Such research encourages scholars to reflect upon tensions in their work between the child as a social institution and the lived experiences of the embodied child within the social institution. It acknowledges that the act of research is always a political act. And it exhorts those that are interested in understanding the child, childhood, and the experiences of children to be aware of ethical responsibilities to produce nuanced narratives of digital engagement that are reflective of a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

**Conclusion**

The meaning of the child is always fluid and in process of development, reflecting the ebb and flows of social, technological, political, and cultural change. As the digital intensifies and shifts, the definitions and framings of what it means to be a child also shift. And the reverse is also true, as cultural understandings of childhood and the experiences of children shift, so too does thinking about the digital. For example, current shifts that locate the child and the digital within a rights-based perspective and which advocate for children’s rights to both participate in and be protected in digital environments, forces a rethinking of the figure of the child and the meaning of the digital (see Livingstone & Third, 2017). As another example, children’s roles as influencers, and
as online microcelebrities, open up new questions around children’s creative labour in digital capitalism, which require both a rethinking of the child as labourer and also the meaning of work in digital capitalism.

While it is over 20 years old, James and Prout’s paradigm of the sociology of childhood still provides a useful starting point for scholarship on the child and digital media. Its six features offer avenues to think through the child in digital environments, in ways that position the child as an agentive subject. The basic premise that “children should be regarded as part of society and culture, not precursor to it; and that children should be seen as already social actors not being in the process of becoming such” (James & Prout, 2003, p. vii), is critical for scholarship on the child and digital media. For the child, the digital is not a neutral or benign space, created by adults, where the child enters into it as a preformed environment. Instead, the digital is a space where young people have been and continue to be productively engaged in forming and shaping the contours of their experiences.

References
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