The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Children

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Platforms, Participation, and Place

Publication details
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Published online on: 28 Oct 2020

How to cite :- Heather A. Horst, luke gaspard. 28 Oct 2020, Platforms, Participation, and Place from: The Routledge Companion to Digital Media and Children Routledge
Accessed on: 02 Jan 2021

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PLATFORMS, PARTICIPATION, AND PLACE

Understanding Young People’s Changing Digital Media Worlds

Heather A. Horst and Luke Gaspard

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the media worlds available to young people have changed dramatically. The generation of adults who began their computing lives with home-based Commodore 16s or 64s or the Sinclair Spectrum ranges of computers are now the parents of young people who have in their possession a handheld computing device in the form of a smartphone with about 1,500 times the Commodore’s processing power. Gaming in the form of non-networked gaming consoles has given way to the option of playing on the move via iPods, smartphones, and tablets; downloaded or streamed games via a variety of platforms using a desktop or laptop computer and an ever-expanding range of consoles and dedicated hand-held devices offer the possibility of 3D, haptic, and virtual-reality gaming. During this time, huge shifts have also taken place in the way young people interact and their ability to create media content. Communication between friends has shifted from lengthy (and often pre-arranged) phone conversations and conference calls to a wide variety of computer-mediated communication services that enable the sharing of a range of multi-media and linkable content within large and small personally known and unknown groups on a smartphone, tablet, and via computer apps. The ability to create music, photographs, films, and other creative content has been enhanced through cheaper and more accessible digital cameras and smartphones, often equipped with a variety of basic editing software and the means to share these creations easily and widely. These and many other changes have transformed how young people communicate.

This chapter focuses upon three developments that have fundamentally shaped young people’s media worlds. The first development revolves around the proliferation of cross-media platforms and the capacity for these new platforms to be used across a range of technology tools and contexts. The second development involves how platforms and associated technologies such as public wi-fi can now support greater participation, sometimes thought of as participatory culture, which facilitates young people’s ability to communicate, learn, play, and share in ways unforeseeable even a generation ago. The third development, place, highlights the spread and uneven mainstreaming of practices using social media and gaming in the different local and national contexts in which young people live. Whilst the issues that underpin place are not necessarily caused by
media and technology, the chapter highlights the importance of attending to place’s persistence in shaping the varied practices among youth from different backgrounds, and acknowledge the ways in which place shapes young people’s different — and differentiated — media worlds in contrasting and dynamic ways. In order to highlight these important historical shifts, examples of practices among youth in Melbourne, Australia, are provided from recent research. These examples show that platforms, participation, and place are not mutually exclusive or bounded entities; instead, they build upon each other to reconfigure young people’s contemporary media landscapes.

Platforms

Rapid changes in technology and the possibilities this opens up have provided the grounds for some of the most optimistic accounts of changes in young people’s lives. Within a generation, enormous shifts have occurred not only in the availability of digital computing platforms for young people but also in how technologies are utilised by youth. Established and dominant media forms have given way to new technologies and media uses that only a short while ago were unknown or only viable for a small minority of (adult) users. Television, for example, is no longer the dominant media form in a young person’s media world; instead, the internet has become their go-to media platform for leisure, entertainment, homework, and a range of other activities. In the UK, for example, between 2008 and 2017, while television viewing in a typical week among eight- to fifteen-year-olds had declined by 15%, internet use had increased by 45% (OFCOM, 2008, 2017). The smartphone has grown to become the principal media tool for many young people with recent reports suggesting that US youth spend more time with this device than any other in an average day (Rideout, 2015, p. 21). Nearly all US teens (94%) aged 13 to 17 use social media (AP-NORC, 2017) and video gaming has emerged as the most favoured media activity among this group (Rideout, 2015, p. 21). Among Australian youth, social media is the most commonly mentioned of any offline or online media activity taking place ‘every day’ (gaspard, Horst, Pink, & Gomez Cruz, 2020).

These shifts in media focus among young people can broadly be understood via a dual lens of access and the multi-functionality of technology. In terms of access, many young people, particularly those of the developed West, are now able to access the internet in numbers and at speeds unimaginable only a short time ago. Taking the US as a case in point, at the turn of the millennium the majority of US teens did not possess internet access in the home (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005, p. 77), and even five years later just as many youths were accessing the internet via a dial-up telephone modem as were using high-speed connections (ibid, p. 78). Today, combining reporting data from the EU, UK, and USA, current estimates suggest around 88% of five to sixteen-year-olds live in a household with a high-speed internet connection (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; OFCOM, 2017; Rideout, 2015).

At the same time, free public wi-fi access in shopping malls, cafés, transport, and other venues has helped provide internet opportunities a young person can enjoy beyond the traditionally fixed locations of the home, school, and public library. Between 2016 and 2017 alone, the number of public wi-fi hotspots worldwide was estimated to have nearly doubled to 179 million (Statista, 2017). Hardware platforms for accessing the internet have also become cheaper, smaller, and increasingly mobile. Following the commercial market introduction of laptops, tablets, and smartphones in the early 2000s, these devices now supersede the desktop computer in terms of prevalence within a young person’s home (Rideout, 2015, p. 22). Alongside the shrinking size of computing technology, the costs associated with going online have also witnessed dramatic declines (BLS, 2015). These changes in the media profile of many youths have allowed the smartphone to become the most commonly used device by youth to access the internet (Byrne, Kardefelt-Winther, Livingstone, & Stoilova, 2016).
The pre-eminence of the mobile phone has also been aided by device convergence, which exponentially increases the range of functions that a single media appliance can perform (Jenkins, 2006). For example, as mobile phones have increased in technical sophistication, a typical smartphone can function as a telephone, camera, video-recorder, geo-locator, facilitate computer-mediated communication (e.g., via email, instant messaging, and social network sites), and act as a web browser, document reader, and an audio and video player. Smartphones also offer (online and offline) gaming opportunities. Moreover, with the roll-out of 5G networks in October of 2018, there is the possibility to eliminate network latency (the time data takes to travel between sender and receiver) and increase download speeds to 20 times faster than with 4G. Industry professionals promoting these changes, such as Ronan Dunne, Executive Vice President and Group President, Verizon Wireless, characterise the impact of the technology as akin to ushering in a “Fourth Industrial Revolution” (verizon.com).

Lastly, social media and social network sites (SNS) have emerged as key platforms for youth interaction and identity exploration. The use of social media tools has grown exponentially as they have fundamentally lowered “barriers to communication and sharing”, and in doing so have reshaped “the kinds of networks that people are able to build and support” (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p. 9). As Ellison and boyd (2013) stress, this has also been aided by online users being prepared to shift their coming together within interest-driven virtual communities to build more intimate and social relationships via the sharing of highly personalised information and content. boyd (2008) has addressed how these sites offer for parents a safe space for their children to ‘hang-out’ with peers where issues of time pressure, transportation, and broader societal fears can be mitigated. Meanwhile, for youth, valuable space is provided to explore questions of identity and taste by presenting and managing aspects of a user’s identity that can be viewed, discussed, and altered (boyd, 2008; Stern, 2008; Willett, 2008).

But, as will be even clearer in the later sections, the picture is always more complex than is captured by the focus on changes in technological possibilities outlined above. As a word of caution even at this stage, there are pressures associated with the kinds of perpetual engagement, being always on, which have now been enabled by smartphones and other platforms. For example, Sherry Turkle (2011) has argued that such heightened inter-connectedness breeds increased expectations to be constantly available for friends online. At the same time, she argues, the new technologies’ possibilities for mediating young people’s interactions offer the allure of companionship without the demands of building strong and intimate friendships, while arguably also reducing the ability to engage in quality of thought due to the over-stimulus demanded by engagement with multiple media applications (ibid.).

**Participation**

Digital access offers the potential for the creators of media content and those who use and consume media content to interact with each other in new ways. Traditional top-down broadcast models of communication emblematic of ‘old’ media systems have given way to opportunities for individuals to ‘broadcast themselves’, both through personal social networks but also more widely to unseen and unknown masses via video aggregation platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or the specialist video gaming platform Twitch. As such, the positions of the media producer and media consumer need no longer be separate and exclusive but instead give rise to participants that can amalgamate these once distinct roles into a ‘prosumer’ or ‘producer’ (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Lange, 2014). With the ability to circulate and create culture, share knowledge, build social networks, and connect and play with others in ways never previously envisaged, this ‘participatory culture’ can drive the acquisition of new media literacy skills. These can also be thought of as social skills whereby youth can learn from each other as exploration and ingenuity are valued in
ways that traditional classrooms struggle to accommodate (Ito et al., 2010; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009).

A notable example of this process comes in a seminal study of 800 youth in the United States, the Digital Youth project, that identified the different ‘genres of participation’ — hanging out, messing around, and geeking out — that young people use in their everyday life; and the ways in which these practices reflect learning (Ito et al., 2010). For example, many young people in the US at the time participated in early social networking sites like MySpace and learned norms of interacting, or what might be thought of as socialisation with their peers, through ‘Hanging Out’ with their friends by posting pictures and comments online when they returned home from school. Others who were curious about where information came from or wanted to know how to do things such as changing their profiles on social media, engaged in what Ito’s co-author Dan Perkel described as ‘copy and paste literacy’ by using bits of pre-written code to transform the look and feel of their social media profiles. This, the authors argued, could be conceived of as a form of exploration (‘messing around’) to learn how things work. The third genre of participation, geeking out, often emerged when young people became intensely interested in an activity such as gaming or making videos. In some instances this meant gaining expertise as to how to do a particular activity, joining a community of people who shared that interest, and enjoying the reputation associated with such expertise, including teaching others how to do activities. This was, for many young people, an expression of expertise not always acknowledged in adult-driven institutions such as schools or families.

An important location for youth participation was illustrated in a recent netnography of Steam, a platform downloaded to the computer that is situated at the centre of diverse networks ranging from economic, informational, and social (Gomez Cruz, Horst, gaspard, & Pink, forthcoming). The Steam study was part of a broader project on Transmedia Literacies designed to understand how young people are learning skills outside the school. The authors and their collaborators undertook research in Melbourne, Australia, and surveyed 860 students at four secondary schools and one primary, held two workshops focused upon transmedia storytelling and gaming, and carried out 36 in-depth interviews. Teens celebrated the Steam platform on many levels as it provided a fully immersive participatory space for communicating, learning about games, sharing knowledge, and game-playing that offered an opportunity for community building and developing a shared identity. As one participant commented, “It’s like the go-to for everything”, while another described the platform as “social media for games ... it is a chat thing ... it’s like the apps-store but with friends ... like the apps store and iMessage kind of mashed together ...”. The ability to socialise with like-minded gaming enthusiasts was especially prominent for many users. For example, War Owl, a 13-year-old boy, demonstrated the considerable number of people he had in his Friends List, ‘half’ of which he had known offline while the other ‘half’ he had met online within the platform. Many participants discussed the recommender systems for games within the platform wherein people post their recommendations and reviews of games, as well as let’s play and walkthrough videos. These aspects of metagaming, i.e., the emerging cultures around gaming beyond playing the game itself (Kow, Young, & Tekinbaş, 2014), are also able to be incorporated into the Steam platform via access to YouTube and other platforms, which further support the gaming ecology. The creation of such content proves valuable for gamers as it enables recognition of gaming expertise honed through many hours of gaming. War Owl, for example, developed and refined his presentation and video-making skills through three YouTube channels and more than 30 videos. In so doing, War Owl had identified a niche gaming activity where he was able to monetise his gaming exploits. Here, expertise converges with social networks and the tools to make, share, and circulate content associated with participatory culture.

However, there are difficulties and exposure to risks that can impact a youth’s ability to participate allowed to these possibilities of increased connection and learning. Issues of contact,
content, and inappropriate behaviour plague youth participation in online spaces. Although popular media stories often overstate the occurrence of offline contact with strangers and the number of contacts young people possess in their social media networks, many young people continue to leave themselves vulnerable to identification by maintaining a public profile often with personal information including phone numbers or addresses (Livingstone et al., 2011, pp. 38–9). Moreover, inappropriate, nasty, or hateful content online are everyday experiences for many young people, while the incidence of cyber-bullying is on the rise (Livingstone, Mascheroni, Ólafsson, & Haddon, 2014; OFCOM, 2017). Alongside this, more than half of young people reported that they had blocked a message from a person they did not want to hear from (OFCOM, 2017, pp. 167–8). Meeting a person face to face having first met online is a practice undertaken by only one in four youth (Livingstone et al., 2011, pp. 38–9).

Apart from such risks, a ‘ladder of opportunities’ is in place that shapes how much or how little youth actually exploit the digital technologies at their disposal. Nearly two decades ago David Buckingham (in Seiter, 2005, p. 6) observed that in practice the majority of youth under-used technology and rarely engaged “in relatively more creative or technologically complex activities”. More recent research indicates that the majority of youths’ media uses remain clustered around a small number of activities. Principally these are communication, content consumption, gaming, and schoolwork, with few users engaging in more technically challenging activities such as file-sharing, content creation, and civic participation (EU Kids Online, 2014; Livingstone, 2012). It is also important to bear in mind how factors such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘social context’ impact a youth’s technological inclusion or exclusion and ability to exploit technology (Buckingham & Willett, 2006; Seiter, 2005, 2008). How parents perceive the role of technology within the family home, e.g., as a tool of education or entertainment, how it is embedded within the routines and spaces of the household, parental skill and knowledge levels, and their ability to mediate youth access, have all been addressed as crucial factors that can cultivate or hinder young people’s relationships and uses of digital technology (boyd & Hargittai, 2013; gaspard, 2015; Horst, 2012; Lally, 2002; Schofield Clark, 2013; Tripp, 2010).

Finally, further complicating youth participation is the issue of how young people often struggle to contextualise the environments in which their web browsing takes place, further driving calls for an increased focus on digital literacy (Buckingham, 2007). With youth tending to congregate on websites with explicit commercial motivations (see ebizmba.com), Patti Valkenburg (2004) argues that young surfers fail to understand the commercial imperatives underpinning the existence of their favourite sites. This positioning of the young body as an economic body is, however, not a recent development borne from the advent of online digital engagement. Instead, this exploitation has a long history, taking into account differing historical periods, including the use of free or cheap youth labour within pre-industrial and industrial eras (Aries, 1973; Qvortrup, 2005). Later, at the turn of the twentieth century, the department store industry marketed to the needs and desires of young people in previously unseen ways in order to attract mothers into these “palaces of consumption” (Cook, 2004); more recent marketing developments point to the deep entrenchment of boundary marking between youth age groups as a way of further encouraging differing consumption practices among young people (see Cody, 2012 for discussion). Indeed, even within the media industry, creators of culture have a long history of finding novel and not so novel ways of framing youth participation in their own culture as a commercial practice (Cook, 2004; Kinder, 1999; Kline, 1993). In the digital age, media corporations have expertly navigated the media worlds that youth inhabit in order to create spaces for participation, including those for entertainment, game-playing, citizenship, and community which are intrinsically tied to consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Grimes, 2008a, 2008b; Hill, 2011).
The ladder of opportunities discussion suggests that not all young people have access to the same opportunities and choices. This raises issues of access, equity, and digital disadvantage, which are often associated with place as well as other demographic factors. Despite government efforts in many countries to reduce the digital inequalities some groups encounter in comparison with others, there are essential divides that must be acknowledged concerning the quality of the digitally mediated life a young person can and does encounter. A young person’s social-economic status (SES), their age, gender, household structure, but also region within their national context, all remain essential determinants of their digital experience. On the one hand, a young person’s wealth is a likely indicator of the type of social media platform they use (Lenhart, 2015); older children, boys, and youth from middle-class families enjoy better quality home internet access than girls, as well as younger and lower-class children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). On the global stage, UNICEF reports that significant disparities exist worldwide between urban and rural home internet access for youth, with those from the lowest-income countries using the internet the least (UNICEF, 2017).

Globally, 12% fewer women are using the internet than men, and in some developing countries, where girls encounter severe restrictions on their rights in comparison with boys, substantial digital gender gaps are present. In India, for example, less than a third of online users are women (UNICEF, 2017). Even within OECD countries gender differences in digital use are present. More boys go online daily than girls, boys use the internet at an earlier age, and are much more likely to use a desktop computer to access the internet, whereas twice as many girls use a smartphone (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). Conversely, girls encounter more online risk than boys, experience higher levels of cyber-bullying and being bothered by others, encounter more upsetting content, while also experiencing higher levels of parental mediation of their internet use (Ito & Horst, 2019; Livingstone et al., 2014).

This high proportion of girls utilising mobile phone technology as a critical access route to the internet is significant as it raises issues of concern also found with low-income youth. More impoverished youth, especially if the young person belongs to an ethnic minority, have lower levels of home internet access (Child Trends, 2015), are more likely to rely on mobile-only access within the home, either via a tablet or smartphone, and have the smartphone as the most commonly found computing device in the home (Rideout & Katz, 2016). In these low- and moderate-income homes, despite internet access being near-universal, families experience severe impediments to the quality of their computing experience. Interruptions to service, slow service, use of out-dated technology, and youth unable to gain sufficient time on computing technology due to sharing device time with other members of the household, are all common challenges facing more impoverished digital youth (ibid.), impacting upon opportunity and digital creativity and skill development. While parents cite the high cost of a home computer and internet access as the principal reason for not investing in these, the report Opportunity for All points to many implications of mobile-centric internet access for youth (ibid.). Such youth are less likely to use their technology to complete homework when compared with those using a computer or laptop at home, as well as playing fewer educational games and looking up less information that interests them (ibid., pp. 34–5). The increased flexibility and privacy afforded by mobile devices for youth to access the internet also increases exposure to risk (O’Neill & Dinh, 2015), while reducing the parental opportunity for mediation and support of their children’s media use. At the same time, Byrne and colleagues (2016, p. 36) argue that the use of a small screen negatively impacts the ‘complexity’ and scope of content that can be accessed.

It is also important to remember that inequalities also exist within developed and highly connected cities, such as Melbourne, Australia, voted annually since 2011 as the world’s most liveable
city by the Economist Intelligence Unit. In work carried out by gaspard and colleagues (2020) exploring transmedia and informal learning practices among teens aged 12–18, they found that, of 838 school students, a little under 2% of teens surveyed did not possess an internet connection at home. Tim, a 13-year-old boy who attended a school in a multicultural lower-class suburb in the east of the city, provides a case in point. Although born in Melbourne, Tim was from a South Pacific island background and he found school difficult. His teacher commented that he would often play-up in class and his dedication to completing work was a rarity rather than the norm. His principal carer, his grandmother, did not have an internet connection at her home, meaning Tim’s opportunities for digital participation were severely limited. With a tablet device as the sole piece of digital household technology available to access the internet, school and the occasional visit to a friend’s home offered his only sources of going online. The local library was not a consideration, which meant his game-playing was restricted to downloading free games from the App store while at school, which he could play later offline. However, because of the school policy to block many websites, including social media platforms such as Facebook, there was only so much he could achieve in his internet exploration.

Due to the curbs on his internet time, Tim was not able to participate to the same degree in online culture as many of his friends. He did not play web-based multiplayer games or examine game reviews or consume YouTube videos on game-play (the platform found by the research team to be the hegemonic learning tool in youths’ media culture and in many cases their principal source of information). Despite having three social media accounts, Tim had only ever posted two photos to these and was generally a very infrequent user; he was also unable to utilise the internet for any of his school work. Whether embodying the limitations of his internet participation that his situation dictated or because he did not see value in the affordances of being online, when questioned as to how he felt about his degree of internet use, Tim claimed “I think I’m doing all right. I don’t need to be on the internet more than I should be”.

Platforms, Participation, and Place: Looking Ahead

Platforms, participation, and place represent three key developments that have altered how digital youth engage in and create their media worlds. While important individually, when overlaid together they provide a more balanced and more complex framework to account for the dynamism of the media worlds that underpin digital youth engagement. On the one hand, digital devices and evolution in software tools and platforms have led some to paint a landscape of abundant opportunity for young people that resonates with narratives of ‘digital natives’ advocated by Prensky (2001) and Barnes, Simun, Gasser, and Palfrey (2009). Yet the infrastructure and hardware that supports these practices, the software architecture facilitating the exploitation of online opportunities, and how these opportunities are made more or less available to particular young people, include many factors that remain outside their direct control.

If computing technology keeps to the experience curve it has so far produced, it will become even cheaper, smaller, and more powerful than the technology of today. This means that one possible future may be the offer of more complex software platforms with greater degrees of immersion and participation, possibly to degrees that, even from a current viewpoint, may seem unlikely or even absurd. Yet, important questions remain as to how youth are best positioned to exploit the advances of this brave new world. Are the increases in computing power and internet speeds likely to overcome the bottlenecks that appear in the way youth use technology? Moreover, if the above technological scenario is to occur, what measures or forms of digital literacy can help mitigate the increased risks that accompany the opportunities from further digital engagement? Manuel Castells has argued that the internet is being increasingly geared towards supporting the economic interests of a few commercial entities (Castells, 2002). Has the hope of an internet geared more toward
achieving broader social good been all but extinguished as conglomerations increasingly determine
the internet’s evolving architecture rather than nation-states and its users?

Moreover, what of the digital inequalities that impact many different groups in society as
youths’ digital contexts typically continue to reflect the social disadvantages they experience
online? Even if smartphone penetration is likely to increase among the economically disadvantaged
youth of the Global South (e.g., Kant, Horst, & Drugunalevu, 2019), will 5G roll-outs in the
developed North further exacerbate the divides already present? Without critical intervention
into the way media worlds are constrained and restricted by institutions and the structural dimen-
sions of society, existing research suggests that there are already indicators of the answers to many
of these questions.

Note
1 This refers to research funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme
under grant agreement No. 645238. Further details about the Transmedia Literacies project are available
online: https://transmedialiteracy.org.

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