Introduction

Researching children’s digital mediascapes presents exciting challenges for scholars attempting to understand modern childhood (Appadurai, 1996). Statistics from various sources indicate that many children’s lives, at least in the Global North, are permeated with media. For example, a study by the technology education non-profit group Common Sense Media found that children in the United States aged 8 to 12 years consume on average six hours of media daily, not including for school or homework (Rideout, 2015). Although there are questions about the meanings of these measurements, such as what constitutes consuming media, few would deny that media are an important presence in children’s lives. Not only are media embedded in the everyday activities of children, media appear as various iterations across the landscape of their daily lives, as in Appadurai’s concept of mediascapes. A globally popular children’s television show might appear in a family living room on a shared television screen and as a game on a family’s mobile device; children’s bedrooms might feature toys, posters, books, and drawings referencing the show; characters from the show might feature on lunchboxes and backpacks in school corridors; key phrases, actions, and plotlines from the show might appear in children’s play; and the list could go on. Even spaces that seem discreetly different, such as online and offline, have permeable boundaries (Leander & McKim, 2003). It seems essential, then, to include media in any study of modern childhood.

In addition to viewing media as important parts of the landscape of modern childhood, the way childhood and the individual child are theorised also plays a key role in how researchers approach the study of children’s media. Researchers studying the sociology of childhood theorise the child as a social actor and aim to reveal the multiple childhoods experienced by children in different socio-cultural contexts (see, for example, James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, Corsaro, & Honig, 2009). Questioning developmental approaches to childhood, these theorists analyse childhood as a social construct and emphasise children’s agency in relation to the structures that create the conditions of modern childhood. In this context, various authors have argued for an understanding of children as both ‘becomings’ and ‘beings’, drawing on developmental and socio-cultural aspects of children’s experiences (e.g., Johansson, 2010; Uprichard, 2008). Researchers across disciplinary fields are investigating both how children negotiate agency through structures, and how structures figure in individual agency. Writing in the field of social semiotics, Gunther Kress describes children’s interactions with cultural texts in this way:
As children are drawn into culture, ‘what is to hand’, becomes more and more that which the culture values and therefore makes readily available. The child’s active, transformative practice remains, but it is more and more applied to materials which are already culturally formed. In this way children become the agents of their own cultural and social making. 

(Kress, 1997, p. 13)

Applying Kress’s theories to the study of children’s digital media implies that research must focus on the social nature of sign making, the transformative work that children undertake, and the cultural meanings of the signs through which children communicate. Given the embedded nature of media in children’s lives, these theoretical approaches create challenges when trying to distinguish media from other texts or semiotic resources available to children.

In addition to challenges raised by these theoretical positions are methodological considerations about how to access children’s media cultures and how to interpret data. Viewing children’s media consumption and production as cultural practice aligns with anthropological approaches, and particularly those ethnographic methods of study originating in social and cultural anthropology. Among the questions raised in this field are those focussing on the ethics of studying an ‘other’ culture. Further, arguably, children’s media culture is ‘other’ to those adults who render it an object of study. Various researchers apply a children’s rights agenda to research connected with children and discuss the nuanced ethical dilemmas and considerations they face (e.g., Alderson & Morrow, 2011; see also Dobson, this volume). In addition to questions about the ethics of accessing children’s digital media culture, there are related problems in the interpretation of such ‘other’ data. Ethnography requires researchers to immerse themselves in a culture to create thick descriptions, yet as adults, there are limitations on how much a researcher can be immersed in children’s cultural spaces. Both areas of study connected with children and media—ethics and interpretation—have a well-developed body of literature and theory. Rather than attempting to distil these bodies of literature in this chapter, in the sections that follow, examples of methods of studying children’s media culture are provided with a discussion of some methodological questions and dilemmas raised by these research practices. The examples start with a premise, as indicated in this introduction, that children’s media cultures are complex sites of interaction that require nuanced interpretive research methodologies.

The Interrelationship between Observation and Interviewing

Given that children’s experience of the media is often substantial, research has tended to focus on how ‘saturated’ their leisure and play might be, in the past by television and now by digital media. There has also been a growing body of research, however, giving attention to how children engage productively with the media they enjoy. In seeking to explore how children interpret and remake media texts, considerable attention has been paid to their play activities. Though play takes place in the home and in public playgrounds, school playgrounds are key sites for extended fantasy play between peers. In this section, the discussion draws on research conducted in school playgrounds in London in 2009–2011 and outlines methodological issues both particular to that research and of broader relevance to qualitative research with children. The research in question was specifically framed as an enquiry into the relationship between children’s playground games and the old and new digital media.

The study described in this section involved multiple data collection methods which took place over a two-year period, including (but not limited to) written observations, video recordings, and interviews with children (see Willett, Richards, Marsh, Burn, & Bishop, 2013). Broadly construed as ethnographic, these methods, the resulting data, and subsequent analytical approaches...
invoke different sets of debates and bodies of literature concerning research methods and methodologies. Fundamentally, the project recognises the advantages of adopting an outsider perspective (and indeed, out of necessity, maintaining an etic perspective on children’s cultural spaces) whilst also employing methods to gain more of an insider perspective, including engaging children as participant researchers as described in the following section (see Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990 for an introduction to the insider/outsider debate). Similar to the ‘Day in the Life’ methodology, the project also involved iterative discussions and reflexive work, moving between insider and outsider perspectives to gain an understanding of children’s media cultures (Gillen & Cameron, 2010). Collecting video footage creates challenges in terms of ethics, data collection decisions, and analysis, with the project drawing from a body of literature on using visual methods with children (see, for example, Thomson, 2009) to consider ethics, affordances, and limitations of collecting video data. The field of visual studies, and more specifically visual ethnography, is well developed in terms of analytical frameworks (see, for example, Margolis & Pauwels, 2011; Pink, 2012; Rose, 2016). However, the project as a whole collected well over 1,000 videos, and rather than attempting to analyse the entire data set of videos, each video was annotated and subsequently used to develop an understanding of specific contexts, for example related to groups of friends or particular trends that were observed. Multimodal analysis was employed to examine the different modes of play (e.g., talk, bodily-kinesthetic, emotion) and to do more in-depth analyses of select videos for specific pieces of writing (for an introduction to multimodal theory see Burn & Parker, 2003; Kress, 2009).

Playgrounds are often bewildering, noisy, and the setting for numerous, overlapping, and fast-moving activities. Iona Opie, in her book The People in the Playground, noted her initial impression of ‘uncontrolled confusion’ and the difficulty she experienced in making sense of what she saw (1993, p. 2). It was only ‘gradually’ and often ‘with the aid of an interpreter’ that she achieved a more assured understanding of what she observed (Opie, 1993, p. 2). It could be argued that a playground is just one, albeit an especially challenging, example of the messy and opaque character of social reality in whatever setting is chosen for research. Law, in After Method: Mess in Social Science Research, remarks that “much of the world is vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct, changes like a kaleidoscope, or doesn’t really have much of a pattern at all”. Although Law almost certainly didn’t have a school playtime in mind, his views resonate with those that an adult observer new to a school playground might feel after the first, and perhaps the 21st, visit (2004, p. 2). The metaphors associated with understanding – itself a ‘pursuit’, a ‘quest’, and a ‘challenge’ – are familiar enough. The aim of observation might be to ‘penetrate’ or ‘grasp’ or ‘uncover’ the meaning of what is observed. Such metaphors can’t be avoided as there is no language of interpretation and analysis without them. But it’s worth being well aware of the metaphors in use and what their implications might be, not least because there are always alternatives.

Observation takes time. Some of the precedents are daunting. Shirley Brice Heath (1996) visited the sites discussed in Ways With Words from 1969 to 1978. Anna Beresin (2010) worked on Recess Battles with her infant son and concluded it when he was old enough to shave. And Iona Opie’s visits to her chosen playground in Liss, Hampshire, began in 1960 and continued until 1983. Though most social research cannot be conducted across such extended periods, the implication of such examples is, first, that observation is a commitment – of attention, patience, and presence, and, second, that observation alone is not enough – other ways of knowing are essential and might well include, as is explained below, a variety of forms of interviewing. What the participants themselves have to say about what has taken place in the playground is essential, and in playgrounds the children are the primary participants. Thompson argues, in Ideology and Modern Culture, that all social worlds are already “pre-interpreted” by the participant social actors themselves and that further interpretation and analysis is always a “re-interpretation” (1990,
To get at social actors’ understanding of their own actions requires talk, and facilitating such talk is a key aspect of playground research. Indeed, how otherwise could research document and name the repertoire of media and new media sources on which children frequently draw in their play scenarios?

Beginning with observation, as an outsider, has some advantages. The perhaps unfamiliar array of activities may be more visible to a playground novice, for example, than to those adults and school staff who spend playtimes on duty, day after day, watching. Curiosity and attention are easier to maintain when what is observed retains some degree of novelty. Outsiders may not know what it all means but the profusion of play activities makes asking, albeit puzzled, questions easy enough. But to revisit what has been observed is not easy at all. Memory is not enough. Observation has to be accompanied by the production of some kind of record of what takes place. Keeping a field diary with detailed notes on every playtime observed is essential, but inadequate. A written record might serve as a reminder of what was witnessed but does not make available its detail and nuance. The written account is almost as confined to the time of the event as the event itself, though arguably, it is possible to write more fully immediately after a playtime is over. More importantly, the written record is unlikely to be accessible by, or of much interest to, the participants themselves. Sound recording has some value and has played a significant part in the more language-focussed play research of past decades. Photographs, by contrast, freeze moments stripped of sound. As a focus for conversation about what might have been taking place, photographs can be a productive resource: children may well be willing to talk around still photographic images, but the talk is likely to be relatively speculative. Perhaps the richest source can be found in video recording of children’s play. The fully embodied enactment of play is available, unfolding in real time. By themselves, video recordings may well be just as opaque as the events they document, but their value lies in the expansion of the time available to observe and to reflect on what has taken place. A five-minute event might well be a resource for repeated viewing and discussion with the participants, and detailed attention to particular moments, slowed to a frame-by-frame presentation if necessary. The recursive interpretation of video records, in dialogue with one or more of the participants themselves, perhaps most adequately facilitates the work of interpreting events that are already meaningful to and are fully pre-interpreted by the children involved. Further observation is also informed by such discussions; the children’s accounts may suggest a new focus of attention or enable the researcher to learn how to ‘read’ the unfamiliar.

Among many examples, those of apparently lone boys involved in versions of fantasy combat may best illustrate the importance of video recording and the use of subsequent interviews intended to explore the media sources drawn upon in such play. The questions guiding the making of the videos discussed here focussed attention on the media sources for their ‘pretend’ play: comics, war films, videogames, computer games, or what? It seemed likely that some combination of all of these might be a resource for their more extended play ‘fighting’ activities. But how exactly did their play relate to its apparent media precedents – was it imitation or something more elaborate than that might imply?

With so much happening all at once in most playtimes, decisions about where to look, and at what, have to be made. For example, it is possible to focus on a single area of a playground for several minutes, documenting what takes place there as children move in and out of the frame. Such an approach has some value where the priority is to examine the variety of ways in which a particular space, or the resources located in it, are used across one or several playtimes. But the examples here follow from a decision to focus on and follow particular boys, in each case a single individual, for as long as possible during extended lunch-time play. In one 20-minute video a boy, seemingly playing alone, ran rapidly across open spaces in the playground, taking cover behind walls, areas of decking, and the few available plants. This was repeated several times.
Only in discussion with him, sitting together watching the video, was it possible to establish any kind of credible interpretation. For him, the presence of playground supervisors was crucial. In his fantasy, it was they who were watching him and whose gaze he had to evade. Open space was thus rendered dangerous and exciting. The assumption that he was alone was contradicted: he insisted that other boys were involved in the same ‘agonistic scenario’, pretending that the playground was a risky and hazardous space in which they were vulnerable to the threat he attributed to the playground supervisors. The importance of exploring the emotional force of vulnerability – rather than enacting combat, which had recently been banned – slowly emerged as the most plausible and coherent explanation for the actions captured in the video. Similarly, another boy, also acting alone, though in this case enacting firing a machine gun and throwing grenades, entirely contradicted the assumption that he was involved in a solitary play scenario. On the contrary, he insisted, there were six boys divided into two teams of three. Again, interpretation depended upon joint viewing and an informal interview conducted in a mostly conversational mode. So the video records were invaluable but also, in themselves, apparently misleading. Almost always, discussion with participants enlarged and complicated what the video record made available. Constructing interpretations thus became a matter of dialogue – with the children who participated and, sometimes, with teachers and playground supervisors – and also of recursive work, on both the video record and the field-notes produced immediately after the event.

A further area of concern turns around the question of research and in what sense participants in the social world of interest – in this case children in playgrounds – have any interest in being ‘researched’ or in collaborating in researching aspects of their own lives. There is little point in making broad generalisations about the relationships engendered in research projects here, but it is essential to question the assumption that research is welcome and that cooperation will be offered by those participants who are of interest to researchers – or indeed that the explanations given are necessarily reliable. In an article, *Pretty in Pink: Young Women Presenting Mature Sexual Identities*, Gleeson and Frith (2004) remark on the realisation that their participants may not have chosen to be understood and, for example, may have used ambiguity to render themselves unknowable. Perhaps a lot depends on how the research subjects interpret the identity of the researcher and on the institutional or broader social framing of the relationship between them and the research.

In an individual research project conducted in the early 1990s, for example, Richards (1998) investigated the encounter between teacher and taught in the teaching of popular music as an aspect of Media Studies. The research findings were fundamentally reworked around a contrast between how much of themselves students in different schools wished to make visible. Results partly reflected the different backgrounds of participants: one school was highly selective, the other an inner city comprehensive. Interviews and discussions are particular speech genres and may not be familiar, or acceptable, to some research subjects. The relative formality and the variable imbalances of power apparent in these forms of address might well make their use an impediment to the achievement of the kind of knowledge or shared understanding to which research with children might aspire. In the London playground research, interviews and discussions were productive in the context of sustained research with primary school children (ages 5–11), across a two-year period. Familiarity and confidence were established through presence and availability, week after week. In other circumstances, for example in research with teenagers, approaches less anchored in formal modes of questioning would need to be explored.

In conclusion to this discussion of observation and interviewing it needs to be emphasised that very little social research can be extended through decades. Equaling the achievements of the studies cited earlier, in terms of duration, is not realistic. Moreover, all social research is in a sense provisional, work in progress, to be re-read and reconsidered, always open to further reflection and discussion. Some of the children in the playground research (2009–2011) are now
adults entering their early twenties and would no doubt be well able to read the published accounts of their childhood media enthusiasms and the play scenarios they elaborated a decade earlier. Such re-visiting of the data might well lead to further interpretations.

**Participatory Research Methods**

This chapter demonstrates that in building an understanding of children’s digital media cultures, researchers need to acknowledge the interpretive aspect of children’s practices and the limitations of research in accessing those interpretations. The section above describes the challenges and possibilities afforded by interrelated observations and interviews. A further means of attempting to gain access to children’s media cultures in culturally responsive ways is through participatory research methods. With participatory methods, children are involved in various aspects of the research process including designing research, collecting and analysing data, and disseminating findings. This seems promising as a way of researching that respects children’s rights and provides insiders’ understandings of digital media cultures that might be specific to children, young people, friendship groups, fan cultures, and so on. O’Kane argues that engaging children in participatory techniques enables “children’s voices, needs and interests to be articulated and take precedence over adults’ research agenda” and further “enables the creation of a more flexible environment in which participants are given more control over the agenda” (2000, p. 152). There have been attempts to develop typologies related to children as participant researchers, with numerous discussions focussing on Hart’s (1992) eight-rung ladder which identifies different forms of participation in a hierarchal relationship, ranging from low levels of participation which amount to little more than tokenism, through to projects in which children initiate all parts of projects and share decisions with adults. Debates surrounding these typologies highlight the difficulties in conceptualising children’s roles as participatory researchers as well as the feasibility of such participation (Malone & Hartung, 2010). For example, Lomax’s (2012) research reveals occasions in which children were excluded in child-led research, and ways in which data collection was limited and shut down through the interventions of child interviewers. For example, in her research, Lomax documented instances when children’s taste in popular culture, or “hierarchies of ‘cool’”, entered into decisions about whose voices were valued by the child researchers (2012, p. 113).

As outlined in the introduction, research in the field of sociology of childhood is interested in theorising children as social actors and finding ways to recognise children’s agency as well as the structures through which children are acting. Participatory research methods are designed to provide agency and voice to children. Several researchers have raised questions about assumptions embedded in participatory research projects regarding children’s empowerment, however. For example, childhood studies researchers Leslie Gallacher and Michael Gallagher argue that “in some ways, research might be understood as a process of socialisation through which children are taught to conform to adult norms and to value ‘adult cultures’ over their own” (2008, p. 505). Similarly, Holland, Renold, Ross, and Hillman (2010) argue that participatory research involving children presents itself as more authentic and higher quality due to the participation of children; however, much of this research is highly structured by the researchers who teach children how to research. Further, it tends to assume that children actually want to be researchers. Critics of participatory methods argue against seeing children as experts in their own lives, calling for researchers to be more reflexive when considering epistemological and ontological questions in relation to both child and adult researchers (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Hunleth, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). One example of a more reflexive approach to participatory research is Marsh’s (2012) analysis of children as ‘knowledge brokers’, which focuses on the role of children as mediators of their cultural knowledge (in this case, playground games and practices). Marsh’s...
Close analysis reveals ways in which children, in their roles as both insiders and outsiders to playground games, were able to “assess what is knowable and how that knowledge should be presented” as well as maintaining trust and credibility with the researchers and with their peers (2012, p. 511). Rather than assuming that the project provided agency and empowerment to children in the research process, Marsh’s analysis demonstrates the complexities of the positions children negotiated as participant researchers.

One of the justifications for including children as participatory researchers is their perceived location as insiders within a child culture (e.g., Kellett, 2010). Arguments made about insider research more broadly claim that insider knowledge of the culture and proximity to participants in terms of social distance are advantageous in developing trust between the participants and researchers. With greater trust, participants are more comfortable, cooperative, and willing to participate, thus improving the quality and quantity of data when compared with data collected from an outsider to a culture (Hodkinson, 2005). Further, where research values an insider’s familiarity with particular language and experiences of a culture, a process of dialogue and exchange between the participants and the researchers is more easily established and may be more productive. Insiders are also able to recognize significant elements when collecting data, as Hodkinson (2005) explains: “[insiders] have a significant extra pool of material with which to compare and contrast what they see and hear during the research process” (p. 143). Hodkinson reflects on his position as an insider when conducting ethnographic research on goth culture, having himself identified as a goth when he was a teenager, and immersing himself in the dress, music, social scene, and online spaces of goth culture while conducting his research. However, there is a risk of assuming that an insider’s knowledge is shared across a particular culture, that is, assuming that there is a single insider truth; and, further, there is a risk of the insider taking too much for granted and losing objectivity, thus not asking enough questions or limiting the information gained from participants. Whilst children as participant researchers have been viewed as insiders within their peer culture, there is very little discussion of the challenges of this position in relation to child-led research. For example, what constitutes a peer culture in a school is very likely to be contested from a variety of positions, and a child researcher may or may not feel able or willing to align herself or himself with, or represent, such a culture.

One further methodological approach involving children is illustrated by projects employing participatory video methodologies or visual ethnographies with children (e.g., Bloustien, 2003; Lomax, Fink, Singh, & High, 2011). As with participatory video methods more broadly, in these studies there is a desire to give a voice to populations who may be marginalized or whose perspective may be missing from mainstream discourse (Milne, Mitchell, & de Lange, 2012). In relation to children and teens, this literature often focuses on how participants’ identities are constructed in relation to and through the videomaking process. Bloustien (2003) discusses ways teenage girls engaged in deep play with visual images and meanings, experimenting with aesthetics and form as they represent themselves in relation to dominant power relations. For example, girls in Bloustien’s study created video performances related to pop music which constructed and reconstructed representations around girlhood, exploring dominant discourses connected with age, femininity, and sexuality.

**Conclusion**

This chapter considers methods of researching children’s media cultures, operating upon the assumption that digital media are embedded in children’s everyday practices. It can be argued that understanding children’s culture requires longitudinal ethnographic studies. Children grow up, however; they are notoriously fickle in their interest in a specific media text, and media modes and cultures are ever-changing. There is clearly value in documenting and analysing broad patterns or processes of engagement with media through a sustained ethnographic approach, and there is value in
analysing children’s media cultures on a more micro level. Within these limitations, the chapter argues for close attention to be paid to children’s interpretations and re-interpretations of digital media. Recognising the child as agentive in making meaning with and through digital media, the methods discussed provide a space in which the child can be a contributor to researchers’ interpretive work. The examples of research methodologies discussed here point to a need for reflexivity. It is through careful reflection about the limitations of research, ways to approach children’s engagements with digital media in culturally responsive ways, and recognition of the child as a meaning maker that researchers come closer to understanding children’s digital cultures.

References


