Foreword

This handbook engages with a wide range of disciplines, with a focus on the very different ways in which digital media have impacted on far reaching societal changes. It has a particular focus on social justice, education and the concerns of children and young people. The editors have assembled a broad range of authors, who write from very different epistemological and ontological standpoints, yet the handbook is able to weave together these perspectives to create a much broader perspective on the impact of digital media on everyday life. Collectively, the chapters provide situated perspectives on subjects such as alternative art websites, children as digital meaning makers, mobile learning, visual literacies, children’s meaning making across material and (im)material worlds, video game making, texting, digital storytelling, e-textiles, Apps, Wikis and video games, set in the context of a changing communicational landscape, the shaping by late capitalism of the way that the digital is positioned and constructed, cyberbullying, pressing issues of privacy and intellectual freedom, gender, activism and deep divides across the planet in relation to access to resources and power.

Within the chapters, fault lines across different spaces and places are profiled, for example, between the world of ‘high art’ and the ‘vernacular’ in the chapter describing ‘Dangerously Deviant’ art, or between ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ nations in the chapter on ‘Exploring the Digital Divide’. These fault lines also can be located within epistemological standpoints, as authors probe the various ways in which digital and social media tools have both emancipated, and also been tools of oppression for young people in particular. This account of the digital divide is nuanced, and authors in this handbook recognize that research has not yet adequately looked at everyday digital practices in low income/ethnic minority communities. Changing knowledge practices have also necessitated changing methodological approaches, as the democratization of knowledge enabled by digital media has made research into these forms more collaborative, participatory and co-constructed. The field has become both more complex and more transparent. By raising these debates the editors have done the field a service in enabling wider understandings of the social impact of digital media to be articulated in one volume.

In my own work I have also explored young people’s meaning making practices across and between the landscape of the digital, but also, more specifically, within the everyday (Pahl 2014). I have also explored how young people’s text-making can offer glimpses of their vision of the future (Pahl 2012). More recently, I have linked this work to an epistemology of ‘radical hope’, drawing on the work of Levitas (2013), Facer (2011) and Pink (2012) in thinking through how futures research can sensitize us to ways of knowing that de-stabilize established understandings of what is possible within digital cultural spaces. I would like to draw on this field because I think it has much to say about the topic of this handbook. I am particularly interested in visions of hope and utopia, as a methodology (Levitas 2013). Through this lens, I explore what these visions of better imagined futures have to offer scholarship within digital media.
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One of my key arguments here is that hope resides in the everyday. Through ordinary interactions and shifts in practice, small changes can begin. The everyday is a field of practice that continues to remain under-explored within literacy and digital media research. As a space of practice and though moments of sensuous enchantment (Bennett 2010) the everyday both de-centers conventional ways of knowing and thinking but is also a site for radical hope. Here, I explore the methodological consequences of this way of thinking. I then tie these ideas back in with the writing presented in this volume, so that their work can be read in a context of a scholarship that is lively, hopeful and always on the move, much as the young people are as they traverse digital worlds in new configurations, settings and ways of being.

Thinking about futures is itself a field that has become more mainstream in contemporary sociology (Levitas 2013, Facer 2011). Here I also draw on the philosophy of continental philosopher Ernst Bloch, most particularly in his three volume treatise ‘The Principle of Hope’. (1995 [1959]). These thinkers have offered the concept of radical hope – a moment when the present can be a site to radically re-imagine the future, as a site of immanent possibility and radical action. As Facer (2016, in preparation) articulates, radical novelty offers a way of acknowledging that our visions of the future might be more than we think they are. She argues for a ‘pedagogy of the present’ which focuses on the present as a space to play with futures and open up potential. Here, I engage with some of the key ideas emerging from this handbook, with this lens in mind.

Futures’ thinking, as a field, has been linked to the world of digital media, initially providing a language of how digital technologies are futures orientated. The refrain from initial adopters of ICT’s was a discourse of, ‘this is going to change how things are’ which was very much bound up with a technological determinism. Harnessed to these views was the work of Lankshear and Knobel (2006) and others who offered a compelling vision of new literacies that engaged with a trope of the ‘wise child’, able to navigate online spaces more successfully than the helpless, de-skilled adult. However, more recently, Selwyn (2011) and Facer (2011) have warned that the digital does not always mean better. Their version of futures thinking is not only an exercise in thinking differently, it is a practical way of looking at the everyday through an alternative lens, and seeing within the ‘now’ the immanent forms of possibility contained within everyday structures. Much of what emerges in the everyday is unexpected and contains immanent possibility within it. This could be conceptualized as the ‘not yet’ from the work of Ernst Bloch (Daniel and Moylan 1997). Meaning making by children and young people falls into this category of the ‘not yet’ as new ways of doing things emerge almost continually, and especially within digital media. For example, new and emerging communicational media are almost continually being found and written about, and the list of digital forms grows longer, as this volume attests. These immanent forms are themselves important sites of possibility and hope.

Many of these chapters articulate a steady march of diversification of new technologies, further spreading into everyday life, schooling and civic engagement arenas. The authors trace, carefully and hopefully, ways in which children and young people engage with new media in diverse ways. For example in ‘New and Strange Sort of Texts’ the authors trace a path from the early adoption of hypertext to seeing hypertext as transformational technology to a more rhizomic and unboundaried account of how young adult readers have engaged with texts in non-linear and complex ways. These kinds of blurring and multi authoring practices are described in many chapters. For example, Di Cesare, Harwood and Rowseell in their chapter on ‘Mapping children’s im/material thinking in a digital world’ describe how digital spaces contain immanent affordances for play, experimentation and emergent practices that enable new identity formations to surface, as avatars become tools of ‘as if’ possible worlds. Reclaiming digital spaces is a powerful way in which digital media can be harnessed to the social good,
as Denner and Martinez explore in their chapter on ‘Children and Youth Making Digital Media for the Social Good’. The potential for digital media in fostering civic engagement and local as well as global activism is articulated with a series of examples where by young people have engaged with ‘DIY media’ to re-configure what is possible within digital spaces. These moments of change are enabled through increased access to programming skills and participatory media that offers youth a platform for their voices to be heard equitably and across global and local spaces.

In these chapters, it is clear that an account of digital media that is congruent with existing cultural concerns and strengths of young people is essential. What this therefore necessitates is a kind of nuanced attentiveness to the present moment, recognizing that a rhetoric of the deterministic march of technology is something that can be easily disrupted by the ‘darkness of the lived moment’ (Bloch 1995). Selwyn (2011) guards against a sense of false hope when thinking about the potential of digital media to iron out inequalities of the present. This handbook likewise traverses a wide ground and is not afraid to confront the darker and more complex digital worlds of everyday life. For example, in the chapter on cyberbullying and internet safety, the process of mapping this terrain alerts us to the entwined nature of on-line and offline identities, but also alerts the reader to a nuanced understandings of how digital media can amplify existing vulnerabilities. Recent concerns about Twitter trolls and the clear campaigning of the Everyday Sexism website (http://everydaysexism.com/) have alerted researchers to the way in which digital platforms can act as coercive and sometimes extremely harmful sites of harassment and bullying. The interface with the law is also explored in the chapter on the Leveson inquiry which provides a useful perspective on the ethics of press regulation. These very public debates draw on present concerns about whose voice counts, where and how, and draws us into a wider framework of regulation that is both protective, and in some cases, could also be restrictive.

What this necessitates is a vision that recognizes the fault lines across the many worlds that digital technologies evoke. Many of the chapters describe the ability of digital technologies, or ICT’s to open up new opportunities for civic engagement. Twitter in particular has been valorized in its role in the Occupy movement and protests across the world. At the same time, concerns about trolling and extreme sexism on Twitter continue to be strongly voiced within the media. However, the potential for everyday creativity, engaged and cosmopolitan engages of ideas across local and global spaces, and experiment and vernacular creativity is also a feature of digital media as articulated so eloquently in this handbook. The handbook celebrates sites of possibility (Hill and Vasudevan 2008) where children and young people are engaging in processes of re-making and re-visioning their worlds through creatively engaging with digital spaces. Sliding between and within these spaces are ordinary citizens living their everyday lives in particular trajectories and settings. These lives are subject to the materiality of the digital – mobile phones fall and shatter, people spill tea on lap tops, run out of money for mobile phone contracts, and are living in and between instructions of how to do things, meanwhile, eating, sleeping and learning. Digital stuff pervades these worlds, but also is apprehended in more complex ways than can be initially understood by the research community. Unless studies are embedded and truly ethnographic, we can only apprehend at second hand some of these experiences young people are having, particularly within communities not immediately accessible to the research community of the university.

In the field of education, the New London Group (1996) articulated a new pedagogical vision, focused on situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice. This offered a vision for literacy education that incorporated critical literacies pedagogy together with a multimodal framework that considered design as part of the process. As a modernist vision of progress, it was widely cited, and for many years after, this was the touchstone of a pedagogical moment whereby young people were
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urged to create and reflect critically on texts. However, as this handbook shows, meaning making through digital media is both more complex, more wide, more deep and more dangerous than these visions allowed. Young people are engaging in complex and risky work through and within digital spaces, and this is precipitating a re-thinking of what it means to make texts and engage with them online. At the same time, slowly, scholarship in the field of the post human and the new materialism has encroached on settled conceptualizations of what ‘the digital’ might mean. Work by Bennett (2010) has challenged the way in which settled understandings of the relationships between matter and the body have emerged. Instead, a dialogic relationship between the making of texts, together with an appreciation of the importance of the body in space has led to new forms of understanding of how digital forms are apprehended based on concepts of emergence and entanglement (Ingold 2011).

Leander and Boldt (2013) have articulated a new understanding of how young people engage bodily with digital stuff. Rather than apprehension being linear, purposeful and directed, they recognize everyday engagement with the digital as being entangled, with youth moving across material and immaterial worlds with ease, thereby providing a challenge for researchers who then have to come to terms with these blurred realities. Researchers instead have to move beyond the boundaries of the social, the material and the immaterial, and recognize the constant oscillation that takes place between these different worlds in everyday life. The present becomes the urgent space of practice where research needs to concentrate itself more powerfully. Tracing the flows of power and mapping the geometrics across the spaces of home, school and public places becomes a new and exciting task in the field of digital research.

The consequence of this new recognition of the processes of coming to know what it is like to live within and around digital stuff is that methodological tools need to be more complex and more nuanced. The potential for big data tools, and existing affordances such as Twitter to harvest data, for example, on the riots in the UK, has been described by researchers such as Farida Vis (Procter, Vis and Voss 2013). However at the same time, the lived experience of new technologies still needs teasing out with small and disturbing moments in classrooms, homes and communities recorded in interaction with more spatial mapping technologies. Equally, sensory ethnographies of the digital might include feelings, emotion, touch and smell in new ways (Pink 2009).

The role of the imagination in constructing better possible futures and spaces of hope and possibility is critical in the process of re-visioning digital technologies. While the present is a key site for research, many of the chapters in this handbook point to the role of the digital in both education and civic engagement. The digital as a site for democratic engagement and as a place where culture can create alternative spaces of practice, through art and imaginative engagement with model forms, is critical here. This new space of radical openness requires new tools of engagement. Within the handbook many of these are mentioned, for example relational cosmopolitanism, interdisciplinary, participatory and dialogic spaces of enquiry. Co-production is a way of acknowledging the contested and distributed nature of knowledge (Pahl and Pool 2015). The practice of ‘not knowing’ might become as important as the practice of ‘knowing’ (Vasudevan 2011). In many of the chapters, beginnings of things were accidental or part of wider activist agendas. This requires a conceptual framework that is distributed, and understands communicative practices to be a meshwork drawn from a complex of multimodal semiotic resources. Acknowledging the deep complexity of everyday life sometimes means that methodologies derived from one mode only, such as interviews, are inadequate for apprehending what is going on here. As Law (2004) said, methods and even more methods’ practices, construct the reality they purport to investigate.
Investigations also do not need to be made by those who define themselves as researchers. The knowledge that is building up of the ways in which digital stuff is used within communities is broken down in terms of who accesses knowledge and who can understand and grasp the significance of these new ways of knowing. The role of schooling has therefore come into question, from early critiques by Lankshear and Knobel (2006), to more recent critiques by Facer (2011) of the ways in which schools adopt conservative models of possibility in relation to new technologies. However, sites of possibility have opened up, through movements to create critical literacies in classrooms and out of school spaces across the globe (Morrell 2008, Stornaiuolo 2015). This then opens up a new question, which is what is the role of schools when children are learning in very different ways in out of school sites? The concept of learning needs to be allowed to be permeable, and ‘third spaces’ of blended learning in and out of classroom spaces can be opened up (Davies and Pahl 2007). This creates a layered engagement with digital stuff, with complex lines of engagement traced across diffuse spaces. Researching digital daily life might involve recording a tapestry of these engagements, over time and space.

Within and beyond these spaces lies a challenge to consider the role of the imagination in realizing new digital spaces of possibility. This process requires ‘pluralistic tools’ that can grasp the ways of knowing and practices that are slippery evasive and not linked to dominant paradigms of literacy and language within schooling. The range and multiplicity of approaches in this handbook attests to this complex task. Issues of voice, agency and power begin to press upon the utopian visions of the internet as a space for everyone. The boundaries where things happen continue to move, so that the panoptic visions of policymakers continue to be eluded by the muddled logic of everyday practices and the slippage outside the observed world where things happen unobserved and out of site. What is known continues to resist a naming that is settled and historically agreed. The process of producing space then becomes further contested (Leander and Sheehy 2004). Space that the imagination seeks to change is emergent, contingent on everyday life. As stuff comes from stuff, we cannot predict these uncertain, messy moments of transformation. This site of uncertainty is radically different in feeling from the settled accounts of the march of technological innovation. In this handbook it is possible to glimpse the unstable present within a diverse and compelling collection of ideas and articulations of the interrelationship between the digital and the social.

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REFERENCES


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