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EXPLORING SOCIAL MEDIA AND CHILDREN'S DIGITAL CULTURE THROUGH CREATIVE METHODS

Henry Mainsah
Oslo Metropolitan University

Introduction

Social media platforms have become significant spaces where young people socialize and participate in public life (Tsaliki, 2022; Jenkins et al., 2018; Wilf et al., 2023). Young people face increasingly complex social, moral and ethical questions and dilemmas given the way interaction happens in these spaces. However, the rapid changes in technical functionalities of social media platforms, and evolving social norms within user communities, have increased the complexity and multiplicity of meaning-making and the digital literacies available within such environments. The study of digital culture in such contexts requires novel methods and techniques that can enable researchers to better examine the complexity of young people's activities, experiences, and competencies.

This paper explores the possibilities and affordances of a series of visual, narrative, and interactive methods to prompt young people to reflect on the nature of social media spaces and the norms that shape how they operate. We suggest these methods as a fruitful way of understanding ethical forms of participation, dialogue and citizenship in changing spaces of social media (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Technologies such as social media have become an “embedded, embodied, everyday phenomenon” (Hine, 2015: 1). Social media use has become part of an “always-on” culture where young people are almost constantly connected digitally to platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram and Snapchat. It is challenging for researchers to create a reflexive space where young people can adopt a defamiliarized view of their mundane, taken-for-granted and routinized practices on digital media.

This paper contributes to the growing volume of research on creative visual and arts based methodologies for research on digital culture (Ringrose et al. 2019). Creative methods have been used in research with children and young people as a means of

conveying their voices through playing to their strengths as co-researchers (Leigh, 2020). They have been used to “disrupt the habitual, promote change and empathy (Lapum, et al. 2011: 102) and to surface unexpected and less taken-for-granted meanings, understandings and practices” (Lupton & Watson, 2021: 466).

The project and methods

This paper draws on a larger research project in Norway about youth participation and media literacy in digital dialogue spaces. The part of this project discussed in this paper focused on exploring the ethics of participation on social media. It consisted of creative workshops that brought together researchers and 13–17-year-olds, to discuss and reflect on how ethical issues are interwoven in the daily use of social media built around four activities.

In the first activity we asked participants to scroll through their social media feeds and note down the order in which content appeared and develop an explanation for why the content appeared in this manner. We asked participants to take out their smartphones, log into two of their social media apps and list all the content they saw in the chronological order in which the content appeared on their social media feeds on a piece of paper. After that they were asked to work individually or in groups to find out, using any means at their disposal, why content on their social media feed appeared the way it did. The next step was to write down what they thought about the type of content that appeared on their social media, and what they thought the content said about them. As participants note down the content of their social media on paper and talk with members of their group to unearth the functions of platforms algorithms scrolling through their social media the researchers are offered insight on a process of sense making. The exercise offered the participants the opportunity of taking the role as researchers of their social media by doing what they rarely do because they belong to an “always on” culture – reviewing, evaluating and reflecting on what media content they are exposed to, why, and what this means on a broader level.

In the second activity involved storytelling. We provided participants with story beginnings and asked them to complete these stories. The story’s beginning scenarios depicted situations that represented moral dilemmas engendered by both social interactions and infrastructure design on social media. The stories took us to issues such as sharing of personal information on social media, the tone of online discussions, image manipulation, and surveillance by platforms. Participants tend to draw on their own experiences and knowledge to develop their narratives. In this regard, stories gave us insight on the socio-cultural factors that influence their predisposed values and beliefs.

The third activity asked the participants to imagine that they were designers in a company asked to create an app or service that could monitor speech on social media. The app was to be able to automatically block anyone who spreads fake content, bullies, expresses hate speech, insensitive statements, or statements that are hurtful and harmful to vulnerable people. The participants were to draw a sketch of how such an app could look, give it a name, describe who would use it, and discuss the pros and cons of introducing it into the market. By asking participants to materialize scenarios and create drawn paper prototypes of imaginary technologies, the activity invites

participants to ask relevant questions and position themselves in relation to moral and ethical dilemmas regarding technological development from the point of view of producers. It invites participants to consider the technical aspects of an invention in relationship with its social, ethical and political implications on the imagined society (Wuyckens, 2021).

Conclusion

The workshop afforded the participants a self-reflexive moment to navigate, map, and categorize media content, identify social media infrastructural functionalities, and make sense of wider implications. Through the different workshop activities, we have been able to elicit meaning making processes by enabling participants to think from varying positions as user/citizens, co-researchers, designers and regulators. The workshops have afforded participants multimodal semiotic resources for meaning-making by encouraging them to think about their social media-saturated lives by drawing, talking and writing.

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