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To cite this article: Ashley Woodfall & Marketa Zezulkova (2016) What 'children' experience and 'adults' may overlook: phenomenological approaches to media practice, education and research, Journal of Children and Media, 10:1, 98-106, DOI: [10.1080/17482798.2015.1121889](https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1121889)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1121889>



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Published online: 18 Jan 2016.



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What ‘children’ experience and ‘adults’ may overlook: phenomenological approaches to media practice, education and research

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that each utterance of media should be seen as in dialogue with each other utterance, and that children, being the phenomenological hub to their lived media experience, should be recognised as engaging with media holistically. Argument draws upon two recent qualitative studies with children between six and eleven years of age. These studies, although separate, shared certain phenomenology orientated conceptual underpinnings and arrived at relatable findings. Notably that participating children tended to address media in a *platform agnostic* manner and offered little sense that they saw the media platform itself as being of overriding significance to their holistic media engagement. Ultimately, if children’s lived media engagement is dialogic and holistic, then focusing on only one discreet media utterance (like television for example) can be said to become deeply problematic to those within children’s media practice, education and research.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 March 2015
Revised 17 August 2015
Accepted 19 August 2015

KEYWORDS

Platform agnostic; holistic;
dialogic; lived experience;
phenomenology

Media forms long treated as distinct are increasingly seen by organisations that make media for children to be intrinsically linked, or even inseparable (Berger & Woodfall, 2012). The suggestion within this paper is that the lived media experience of children similarly spans media platforms, and phenomenologically speaking, children cannot therefore be addressed through any single platform. We argue however that there are many of us within media practice, education and research who have been slow to realign our understanding of the ways in which media are produced and dialogically engaged with—and can be said to underappreciate how children operate across complex inter-subjective systems in which all media (indeed all aspects of lived experience) are interconnected (Zezulkova, 2015a).

By means of (admittedly truncated) discussion, the paper initially looks to address the ways in which the children’s media practice landscape operates, before turning to consider lived media experience within education. To further argument, and offer illustration, we touch on two recent qualitative studies as conducted by this paper’s authors that, although separate, shared certain underpinnings and arrived at relatable findings. The

first of these studies (Woodfall, 2015), as carried out in the UK, adopted a creative-reflective approach to exploring children's media preferences. Participants included children (aged ten and eleven) and those that create media for children professionally, with the researcher also having a background within children's media practice. The second study (Zezulkova, 2015b), focusing on the philosophy(s) of media learning and teaching, was carried out in two Czech and two US primary/lower elementary schools. It was conducted with children (between six and nine) and their schoolteachers, and featured classroom observations and photo-elicitation group and individual interviews. For conceptual purchase, we then draw upon a dialogic phenomenology, and in turn argue that if a child can be seen as hub to a lived holistic media experience then recognising any medium as singular, isolatable and finalised becomes problematic.

Even though much media may still be recognised as having been created from a platform-led perspective, or at least gravitate around a central *tentpole* media platform, practices have emerged in which media intended for children are developed or operate conceptually, in near disregard of the technological platforms that they operate across. This aligns with Jenkins, when he sees children as reaching across "media platforms—from television to records, books, stuffed toys, public performances, feature films, and much more" (2013, p. 4). We however extend this understanding beyond what might traditionally be seen as a media platform, towards that expressed through other aspects of a child's lived experience (like media role-play for example). In turn, we see *cross-platform media* as that which spans platform, irrespective of the (predominantly top-down) intentionality of transmedia narratives (Ibrus & Scolari, 2012), and even though many others follow that path, we do not adopt narrative as a pre-conceptualising frame to discussion here. Instead we focus on media experience as expressed by children themselves. It is worth noting that we research and write firmly outside of those perspectives that consider children as in need of protection from or empowerment through media (perspectives that although important, we see as over-rehearsed), and stand paradigmatically against research approaches that might preordain meaning-making in this light.

Producing and engaging with media across platforms

Organisations like Disney and DreamWorks, long implicitly producers of cross-platform media, now talk explicitly about "making products and content" (Deuze, 2013, p. 172) rather than programmes or films. The BBC similarly, and particularly within its children's department, is wedded to a platform agnostic *360 degree* commissioning approach; one that *ideally* looks in all directions (across all potential platforms) throughout each production's development. These positions, or ambitions, may be seen as neoteric and forward-facing to many, yet they could equally be seen as reflecting only a *rhetoric of crossmediality*, which to some measure conceals unreconstructed platform-led industrial practices (Bennett & Strange, 2012). There may well be a tension between top-down *pan-media* strategy and the day-to-day, perhaps more siloed, activities of those that actually create media; whatever the reality however, children clearly access media across platforms.

Within the first of the studies touched on within this paper, those that make media for children tended to self-identify as coming from, and align with, a particular area of practice. Whether it be television, publishing, interactive media and so on, practitioners



Figure 1. Supercow: Media concept as created by a participant within the UK children's media practice orientated study.

appeared to think *platform first*—perhaps operating beneath, and in opposition to, institutional crossmedial rhetoric. Significantly however, when asked to develop a media concept that they would want to engage with, children within the same study offered little sense that they saw the media platform itself as being of overriding significance to their holistic media engagement. There was mention of television, internet and mobile, but the child participants appeared much quicker to discuss attributes like fun, kindness, play, story, connection and learning, than they did media platform—addressing their media preferences in a near *platform agnostic* manner. Focusing on interactions with the child participant that created the children's media concept *Supercow* (see Figure 1), it was character, and the place within the media of the participant themselves, that appeared to be of most significance, not the platform. The participant (age 11) seemed at ease with her pet bovine hero being equally accessible through television and online; and self-casting alongside Jack Black (playing *Supercow*) and Johnny Depp (playing the villain *Dr. FrogEvil*) she positioned herself intimately within her media.

Returning to the broader media landscape there will of course be examples of media that appear platform specific or bound, but if a production is a success it will soon step across platform, and in some ways this process could be said to be symbolic of that success. *Harry Potter* for example started life as a short print run book, and similarly *Horrible Histories*, *How to Train your Dragon* and *The Gruffalo* were all conceived within publishing before they moved to screen, and stage, and beyond. Taking an alternative path *Angry Birds* started life as a video game before being catapulted across platform; with the toys, books, animated series and film arguably just as much a part of a child's connection with the media phenomena as the video games themselves. It might be worth reminding ourselves that children engage with media through *doing* (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004); we can for example picture a child doing *Star Wars* Lego as they draw on a repertoire of platform spanning *Star Wars* texts (whether they be cartoon, film, book, comic, toy, game and so on). It is however the child's lived experience that actually ties these texts (pre or self-imagined) and platforms together.

Media experience as lived and reflected upon in education

The school playground acts as a unique platform agnostic space, in which a child's play can draw upon, and co-opt, "the source text/artefact" (Marsh, 2014, p. 125). Significance sits though in the lived experience of children and their particular interests, intentions, social circumstances (Willett, 2014) and interactions (Vered, 2008), rather than within pre-ordained textual constraints, or in light of any particular platform. Turning for instance to the media education orientated study touched on within this paper, what appeared to matter in the playground to the children that engaged with the *Angry Birds* media phenomena, was their experience of remixing the basic plot and ('Piggy' and 'Birdy') main characters in to long-standing folkloric play (such as a freeze tag game). Intriguingly however, when these children were asked in the classroom to retrospectively discuss their *Angry Birds* media engagement, they become attentive to constructed media dichotomies; appearing to prioritise one platform over another, even when these positions seemed not to mirror their own holistic and lived media experience, but the ways in which they perceived *the adult* might recognise and value each platform.

Media texts and platforms (and the production and consumption practices relating to them) are often uncritically divided by curricula and instruction into the inherently good or bad, and school or age appropriate and inappropriate. Here pupils soon learn to distinguish between those that feel more or less favoured within the classroom setting. When a US participant (age 8) in the media education study stated that, "I like plays more, because movies are not so good for you. Plays are healthy for learning [...] Like in movies you learn bad words, not good things", he appeared to be offering an understanding of those media platforms and texts that might be educationally sanctioned and those that might not be. One of the US participants (age 7) stated that she would like to learn photography and how to make videos, *but not at school*, because, "you can get into trouble if you use it at school". Similarly, a Czech participant (age 9) said she would not want to learn about digital and electronic media in school, because "I don't want Miss teacher to get angry", whilst another child (age 6) said he would like to learn about all media in school, but suggested that he and his peers "would have to be careful so the teacher doesn't notice". From the perspective of the educator, one of the Czech primary schoolteachers correspondingly noted that as children get older they are less likely to tell teaching staff about media engagement outside the more valorised media platforms and texts.

In a way that can be said to shackle teachers and young learners to oppositional poles, compulsory education is especially prone to reductionism, with difficult to bridge “distancing dichotomies” (Sholle & Denski, 1993, p. 299) appearing throughout its structures and processes. McDougall (2014) instead calls for a “reflexive and negotiated pedagogy” which recognises the complexity of media engagement (p. 3), whilst Gauntlett (2008) usefully encourages educational research and media practice to be more interested in the people and less so in the media technology. Children then, if we recognise them holistically, and their media engagement as dialogic and potentially pan-media, should not be contained within hierarchical distinction that appears to value one media platform or text over another. The education studies and pedagogic practices that seem to be most successful in exploring child’s media engagement, and facilitating the learning that disturbs media dichotomy and the home-school divide, are those that move away from medium/technology-first approaches and instead invite young learners to lead dialogue and draw on their experiences (e.g., Parry 2014). After all, and as within the discussion on the media practice landscape above, it is the child’s lived experience that ties media texts, platforms and, by extension the child’s multifaceted learning about media, together.

A child’s holistic and dialogic phenomenology

This paper clearly sees lived experience as being at the heart of a child’s media engagement, and here we look towards a holistic and dialogic phenomenology by means of offering the footings to further argument. Initially, we turn to Husserl’s foundational phenomenology, in that it focuses on the moment experience is constituted “as it is in itself” (1931[2014], p. 116). Under a Husserlian reading, life only comes in to *being* as we subjectively experience it and make meaning from that experience. In this light, we can see a child’s lived experience and meaning-making as of significance; and it is what children *attend to* that matters, not pre-supposed conceptualisation. Yet experience is not simply a matter of subjective focus, it is socially situated and inter-subjective; and thus we are alerted to the dangers of isolating to the “individual” (Stawarska, 2009). Usefully Husserl validates a “we-subjective” everyday lived experience, whereby we all exist through “living together” (1936[1970], p. 108); a living together that (turning to Bakhtin) spans a dialogic *co-being*.

For Bakhtin, human experience is situated within an “encounter between human beings” and thus the human situation is “participative” (Steinby & Klapuri, 2013, p. xvi). The subject of interest is not the individual, but an act of co-being or co-experience in which the self is relational to others and shaped dialogically. Bakhtin argues against the unitary, and here a dialogic co-experience leaves meaning-making and understanding contingent, open-ended and many-voiced. In the words of Dewey, experience “is a single continuous interaction of a great diversity” (1916[2011], p. 93). The diversity of lived experience cannot however be fully comprehended unless, as Husserl’s student Stein suggested, the “subject of experience” (1916[1989], p. xviii) is treated as a *whole* that “senses, thinks, feels, and wills” (p. 5). To Stein, human meaning-making and understanding should be approached holistically. The child’s life is, as Dewey (1916[2011]) notes, “an integral, a total one” (p. 9); they are,

not conscious of transition or break. There is no conscious isolation, hardly conscious distinction. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along. Whatever is uppermost in his mind constitutes to him, for the time being, the whole universe. (*ibid.*)

Within Dewey's *universe* demarcation and hierarchies are flattened as children fluidly and fluently move across delineation, that they themselves might not recognise. The media experiences of children, as they *think* about, *feel* and *do* various media, only hold phenomenological significance in light of a child's preferences and foci—and regardless of any other overlaid pre-supposition.

Bakhtin saw lived experience as being shaped across a plurality of interconnected utterances formed in relation to otherness. In this way each *lived* utterance, and therefore each media utterance, can be understood holistically as 'part of a greater whole' (Holquist, 1998, p. 428). We can picture children's platform spanning media lives as being a polyphony of utterances that share the potential to feed off of, and inform, each other. In recognising each of the multiple utterances of media as sitting within a many voiced dialogism, with each utterance, upon each platform, operating relationally, then engagement with any platform or text, in the singular, becomes just punctuation to an ongoing holistic dialogue, and significantly no one platform (or experience) can be seen as sacrosanct, isolatable or finalisable.

Bakhtin leaves us comfortable with the suggestion that texts (however much we may be tempted to separate them), and by extension media platforms and aspects of lived experience, should all be recognised as permeable, polyphonic and polysemic; as being open to multiple dialogic readings, re-readings, cross-readings and writings. At this point, it becomes difficult (and maybe unnecessary) to force platform delineation, or to isolate children from their media experience. When each media utterance (books, toy, cinema, television, etc.) can be said to be in dialogue with each and every other utterance, and children can be seen as phenomenologically centring their own media lives, then any understanding of children's media meaning-making should be built not through adult pre-supposition, but from the child's experience outwards.

Within the studies touched on in this paper, the schoolteachers and media practitioners tended to approach media through platform, yet children appeared quicker to discuss the preferred attributes of their media of choice than the platform through which they engaged with that media. There was mention of television, internet, mobile and so forth, but predominantly only when the researchers mentioned them. Both studies saw children as passing smoothly from one text to another, from one media platform to another, from one role to another. With platforms, texts and the child operating as part of a meaningful whole, children's media engagement was recognised as holistically dialogic, and even at times promiscuously oppositional to adult oversight. In this light *all* platforms and texts were seen as positionable within a complex physical, emotional, sociocultural and creative unity—one centred by and (partially) orchestrated by children themselves. These studies suggest that regardless of any adult platform bound interpretation, children do not readily turn to platform as a means of understanding media, and that they are quick to complicate and override reductionist view of their media lives, even when the educational setting and pre-supposition may privilege one medium, or group of media over another.

From media-centric to experience-centric approaches

We recognise media practice, education and research as having created demarcation where children might not. Reiterating this point, why would a child not assume that they should be able to access, co-opt and re-create media in a space, time and fashion of their own choosing? When children are immersed in a holistic lived media experience, they are unlikely

to picture any individual media utterance to be of great consequence; it is their overall platform spanning *media universe* that holds key significance. This is not to completely dismiss the conceptualisations and media production practices that have formed around individual platforms, or to undervalue the affordances of each; indeed, there are significant questions to be asked of the ways in which children select and make use of the different platforms that make up their media universe. We argue not against acknowledging the media platform, but for a corrective away from platform first or platform only approaches.

Here may sit a useful note to practitioner and educator: to recognise that children engage with media in platform agnostic and holistic ways, and that they should reorientate away from a media-centric outlook towards a more experience-centric one. There are also significant implications at play for those that undertake media research with children, with the arguments made across this paper bringing in to question research approaches that address media (and/or children) as singular, isolatable and finalised. Reworking Gauntlett's earlier criticism, such research could be accused of fetishising the medium and underappreciating the child, and how a child's media experience binds together a polyphony of media utterances. There is of course much research that does position children's experience at its heart, and to many this discussion might seem a straw man argument in the making. Yet, there is also much research that isolates medium from medium—as well as media from child. Neither of the studies drawn upon within this paper could be said to be fully participatory, and are far from *ideal* (indeed under a dialogic reading there can be no one way of researching), but both researchers feel persuaded that instead of shaping research in light of media platform, or pre-ordained groupings of media, future research should look to the child to act as a guide to their holistic lived experience.

Research conducted under a child-centred dialogic and holistic phenomenology could be accused of a "relativist ontology" (Apelgren, 2003, p. 133), whereby the instability, inseparability and unfinalisability of experience and meaning-making becomes more troublesome than liberating. And if one argues towards "the total experiential context" (Stein, 1916[1989], p. 39), and against the unitary, how does one find conceptual coherence? A Husserlian *phenomenological reduction*, in which pre-supposition is placed out of play, and we *temporarily* bracket out (other) media, or other aspects of lived experience, might appeal to some; the part within the whole could then be addressed without denying intersubjective complexities, or recourse to reification. Others may feel more comfortable in quietly accepting that a child's experience in itself provides firm enough footings from which to research (develop or teach) media. Either way, we would be well served to remind ourselves that a child's engagement with media can be said to operate across a dialogic plurality. Children live media holistically, in a way that does not demarcate and delimit; something media practitioner, educator and researcher may be prone to overlook.

It is a child's lived media experience that should lead our understanding, not our own or institutional historicity and pre-supposition. In this light, we should avoid addressing any medium as a discreet utterance, even when production habits and institutional structures may say otherwise. We are not suggesting that hard earned specialisms and interests are thrown away, far from it, but that we should fully recognise that our adult understandings are unlikely to map neatly on to a child's media experience. The argument is not for all to undertake transmedia-style research (indeed that might over-valorise narrative, and platforms), but to see the holistic lived experience of the child as our way in to meaning-making and understanding. To listen to children, and most significantly, to follow their interests in

deciding what is at play. To the researcher in particular, the provocation is to question the ways in which we pre-frame and shape the direction the research act takes, as well as to remain alert to who holds sway in how it is then described, interpreted and reported on. A dialogic phenomenology would require us to recognise the child as entry point, centre and interpreter of their media experience and learning.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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