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Changing Childhood, Changing Media

In the past decade or so, almost every question long asked about society – about the nature of work, education, community, politics, family and identity – has been asked of the relation between society and the internet. Whether the internet is seen as the instigator or the consequence of social change, and whether it is seen as offering the potential for societal improvement or as introducing a new agenda of problems, the very breadth of questions asked and the multidisciplinary expertise already applied to answering them sets a daunting challenge to any attempt to review the present state of knowledge. The same may be said even for that subset of this emerging field of inquiry concerned with children and young people. For it is also the case that almost every question ever asked about children and young people – how they learn, play, interact, participate, encounter risks – has also been asked of the relation between childhood and the internet.

To focus on children may seem a specialized enterprise, even one that is somehow optional for the wider effort to understand the relation between society and the internet. Many pronouncements about 'the population' or 'society' and the internet turn out to refer to adults only, as if children constitute an exception. Yet not only do those younger than eighteen years old comprise one in five of 'the population' in developed countries (and nearly half of those in developing countries), but also every one of tomorrow's adults is a child today. Children's experiences, needs and concerns matter in their own right, requiring a critical analysis in the present. And, requiring an equally critical but also a more normative lens, they matter for the future. Since they are, with some justification, popularly dubbed the 'digital generation', it is also likely that understanding children's use

of the internet can provide a richer insight into that future than could equivalent attention paid to adults.

At the same time, research on children and the internet is indeed a specialized enterprise. Children should not be 'lumped in' with the adult population, though nor should differences between children and adults be routinely presumed. Thus, research must attend carefully to questions of age and development; it requires methodological sensitivity if it is to explore children's experiences, and it should address some specialized questions regarding parenting, schooling, identity expression and risk-taking. Yet the same broad, multidisciplinary framework required to understand society and the internet is also required to understand children and the internet. In seeking to understand how children learn, laugh, interact, participate and encounter risks online, this book must draw on theories of learning, leisure, communication, participation and the risk society – just as is the case when investigating adults' use of the internet. The payoff is that one may then understand the continuities and differences between adult and child experiences, in empirical and theoretical terms, and one may identify the implications of the activities of this so-called digital generation both for children in particular and for society in general.

Also distinctive to the focus on children is the high degree of public attention, speculation and contestation that the particular combination of children, media and social change attracts. Children and young people are widely perceived, on the one hand, as the youthful experts or pioneers leading the way in using the internet and yet, on the other hand, as peculiarly vulnerable to the risks consequent on failing to use it wisely. This book draws on a range of original empirical sources to examine how young people are striking a balance between maximizing opportunities and minimizing risks as they explore the internet. As we shall see, despite considerable enthusiasm for going online and becoming 'youthful experts', children and young people (like many adults) are finding that access and motivation are necessary but insufficient for using the internet in a complex and ambitious manner. First, there is only qualified evidence that the internet is bringing about any of the changes anticipated; the great expectations are not always met. Second, the emerging picture stresses the variable and complex social conditions that influence how we fit the internet into our lives, these strongly mediating any consequences for work, education, community, politics, family and identity; the realities of internet use can be genuinely challenging.

The polarized public debate that surrounds questions of children and the internet – does the internet make for any change at all or not, does the internet make things better or worse, are children media-savvy experts or newly vulnerable and at risk – inevitably invites a plethora of empirically grounded qualifications of the 'it depends' or 'both/and' variety. The result is an explosion of empirical studies which are largely descriptive, charting first access to the internet and then use of the internet across countries and, within countries, by age, gender, class and so forth, in a wide variety of circumstances. Arguably, this initial agenda has run its course (Lievrouw, 2004; Livingstone, 1999, 2003; Wellman, 2004). Now the challenge is to theorize people's, including children's, engagement with the internet more thoroughly, asking, for example, not who lacks access to the internet but whether it really matters; not simply noting who participates in online forums but identifying whether and how this contributes to civic participation; not simply worrying about the risks children encounter online but asking what is meant by online risk and how it relates to offline risk; not simply asking whether children have the skills to engage with the internet but whether these enable them to engage with their society in all its manifestations – local and global, public and private, serious and playful, enchanting and dangerous.

But clearly, this emerging set of questions widens the focus considerably, encompassing not only children as internet users but also the internet as a mediator of children's participation in society. What do we hope for children in this regard? The following two contrasting quotations, the first from the UK's media and communications regulator, the second from an academic critic, pinpoint my starting point in this book:

> Through confident use of communications technologies people will gain a better understanding of the world around them and be better able to engage with it. (Ofcom, 2004b: para 3)

> Despite the growth in the numbers of internet users, a rather small minority of these users has the capability to use the internet in ways that are creative and that augment their ability to participate effectively in today's knowledge societies. (Mansell, 2004: 179)

As I shall argue, it is vital both to frame ambitious expectations for society and the internet, including for children and the internet but, also, it is vital to draw on rigorous empirical research to assess and critique claims that these ambitions are being realized. In other words, although as we shall see there is a considerable and growing body of evidence pointing to a substantial gap between the great expectations held out for the internet and the present realities of people's

experiences, it is not my intention to use the latter simply to dampen the ambitions of the former. Of course, to the extent that the internet is mooted as a quick technological fix to solve endemic problems in society, such hopes can only be disappointed. But, after the first decade or so of theory and research investigating the social shaping and social consequences of the internet in the lives of children, families and communities, we can surely identify some lessons from the recent past and some guidance for the future regarding how best to reformulate society's ambitions for children and the internet and, thereby, better meet some of its present challenges.

To undertake this task, one could begin in either of two places. Many start with 'the internet'. Here, one may discern that research, especially that conducted in developed countries, is shifting its focus from questions of access and diffusion to questions about the nature and quality of internet use, recognizing the diverse ways in which people are struggling to come to terms with this complex and changing bundle of technologies that, supposedly, can deliver new opportunities for information, communication, entertainment or even, more grandly, 'empower' them in relation to identity, community, participation, creativity and democracy. This starting point has produced much valuable research that I shall review in the chapters that follow. But it also leads us into difficulties. 'The internet' tends to be positioned as the key agent of change, encouraging questions about its 'impact' on society as if it had recently landed from Mars, masking the crucial importance of other ongoing changes in society, including those that are shaping the internet itself. As society expects more and more of the internet, the notion of 'using' the internet has become so unclear as to be wholly unhelpful as a description of an everyday activity. Moreover, this approach tends to position children as 'users', a new category of person with little history or cultural meaning, to be understood for itself and thus inadvertently divorced from such rival categories as family member, school pupil, young citizen or new consumer.

Instead, I shall start with 'children', understood both socially – through their positioning within and engagement with societal structures of home, family, school and community – and historically, for childhood is itself changing, and these changes have a far longer provenance and more widespread implications than any changes associated with the recent mass adoption of the internet, notable though these may be. My purpose in this chapter to identify the key currents of thought and debate that can contextualize a critical analysis of children and the internet so as to overcome the limitations of a technologically determinist approach and to open up a richer account of how and why the internet has come to occupy so much of

children's time and attention by understanding what else is going on in their lives.[1]

Change and crisis in the post-traditional family

In popular discourse, children are staying younger longer, yet getting older sooner. It seems to many that, in some ways, they leave the safety and privacy of the home and enter the public and commercial world 'too soon'; in other ways they delay taking on adult responsibilities for 'too long'. While the sense of golden-age nostalgia in these discourses, along with the moral criticism of young people thereby implied, may be questioned, it is the case that historians and sociologists of childhood report strong evidence for significant social changes in childhood over the twentieth century. Following an earlier shift away from children having a productive role in the household and the wider economy (Cunningham, 1995; Cunningham, 2006), in recent decades Western industrial societies have seen the extension of formal education from early to late teens and a commensurate rise in the average age of leaving home, this pushing back the start of employment and delaying the traditional markers of adulthood. In many countries over recent decades, post-16 education has expanded while the youth labour market has remained stagnant, altering the school-to-work transition (France, 2007). The result is an unprecedented period of 'extended youth' in which young people stay at home and remain financially dependent on their parents for longer.

These historical changes to childhood over the past century or more have themselves been shaped by a series of profound social changes in, notably but not only, the structures of employment, the education system, increased urbanization, relations between commerce and the state, the growth of affluent individualism, the transformation of gender relations, the ethnic diversification of national populations and the reconstruction of household and family. These structural changes are repositioning children within society and altering, even impeding, their passage to adulthood (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). As Coontz observes:

> In some ways, childhood has actually been prolonged, if it is measured by dependence on parents and segregation from adult activities. What many young people have lost are clear paths for gaining experience doing responsible, socially necessary work, either in or out of the home, and for moving away from parental supervision without losing contact with adults. (1997: 13)

At the same time, these same structural changes have also enabled the world outside the home to make increasing incursions into what was once a private, largely non-commercial space defined by tradition and community norms. Ever younger children are now immersed in a consumer culture which emphasizes choice, taste and lifestyle as considerations not just for adults but also for children. The growth and scale of today's child and youth market is equally unprecedented, being not only highly lucrative but also creative in its specialized targeting of young people and, moreover, highly sexualized in its framing of identity and sociality (Kenway and Bullen, 2001). As shown in research by the UK's National Consumer Council (Nairn, Ormond and Bottomley, 2007), 34 per cent of 9–13 year olds would 'rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else' and 46 per cent say, 'the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money'.

As youth culture has come to fill the growing space between childhood and adulthood, the result is children and young people's growing autonomy in the realms of leisure, consumption, sexuality, appearance, identity, rights and participation (Osgerby, 1998).[2] Pressures towards independence and dependence are, in short, in tension with each other psychologically (hence the 'discovery' of adolescence and the teenager as fraught life-stages in conflict with adults; Abrams, 1959; Erikson, 1959/1980; France, 2007), socially (hence the notion of the 'generation gap' and its associated social conflicts) and historically (hence the sense that these are new problems and the adult nostalgia for the established traditions of hierarchy, authority and respect for one's 'elders and betters'). Further tensions also exist – the new youth market is largely funded by parents rather than by any growth in youth employment; efforts to increase youth participation now anticipate the voting age; protections for legal minors seem to constrain teenage rights (in relation to sexual experience, for example). In this new period of 'extended youth', children and young people are betwixt and between, caught in a series of cultural shifts whose effects are at times contradictory rather than complementary.

The economic and legal hiatus that opened up around teenagers over the past fifty years between dependent child and independent adult, exacerbating tensions between the discourses of needs and rights, is partly redressed by the new child-centred model of the family, for the task of tension resolution is transferred from society to parents. Parents must tread the difficult path between providing for their children economically for an extended period of time while simultaneously recognizing their independence in terms of sociality and culture. And it is mainly they who must oversee children's phased entry into the world rather than, as before, the workplace (e.g. via apprenticeships) or community organizations (church, union, clubs). Their task is hardly eased by the fact that, as Gadlin (1978) argues, it is historically distinctive that parents can no longer rely on their own childhood experiences to guide them in managing the spatial and temporal structures of their children's moral, domestic and family life.

These and other pressures together contribute to the process of de-traditionalization characteristic of late modernity. Giddens (1993: 184) argues that we are witnessing 'a democratization of the private sphere', a historical transformation of intimacy in which children, along with other participants in a relationship, are gaining the right to 'determine and regulate the conditions of their association' (p. 185) while parents gain the new duties: to ensure their children's involvement in key decisions, to be accountable to their children and to respect as well as expecting respect. Parent–child relations are thus being reformulated, Giddens argues, according to the emergent cultural ideal of the 'pure relationship', this being 'reflexively organized, in an open fashion, and on a continuous basis' (1991: 91). Thus, by contrast with the Victorian conception of the family, based on status hierarchies and the associated values of authority, duty, hard work and security, today's 'democratic family' (or 'negotiated family'; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) prizes authenticity, intimacy, trust, reciprocity, recognition and role flexibility in support of a culture of self-fulfilment and individual rights.

In sum, contemporary families must negotiate a rapidly changing society without the traditional resources of established relations between the generations, with parents neither benefiting from the experience of their own childhood nor having the moral right to impose rules and sanctions without democratic consultation – no longer is a remote and authoritarian father expected to lay down the law and administer punishment on his return from work. Even what is referred to as 'family' has altered as the normative nuclear family is reconfigured (although in practice, it has always been more diverse than recognized by social norms). As Hill and Tisdall observe,

> the idea of family is to some degree a fluid one, with a mix of concepts at its core – direct biological relatedness, parental caring role, long-term cohabitation, permanent belonging. (1997: 66)

Children too face significant challenges in late modernity. Drawing on Giddens' notion of the 'project of the self', Buchner *et al.* (1995) argue that childhood increasingly includes the responsibility of constructing a 'leisure career' or 'biographical project', a responsibility

that requires young people to anticipate future uncertainties and deal with risk and status insecurity in the context of a loss of traditional forms of family and community support. That loss is, as Coontz suggests above, a substantial one, though it is also liberating. Indeed, Qvortrup (1995) traces a series of paradoxical consequences for childhood as discourses and structures diverge. He argues that while society increasingly avows a positive view of children at the same time it systematically devalues, intrudes upon or excludes their needs and experiences; similarly, children are disenfranchised within the public sphere yet castigated for being apathetic or antisocial; they are subject to increasing surveillance yet seen as deceitful or subversive; their spontaneity and imagination is valued yet their lives are increasingly organized and controlled; society promotes child protection yet it allows many children to encounter serious risk; and so his list continues.

In explaining these paradoxes, Hill and Tisdall point to the strong forces resisting social change, observing that 'children's participation can threaten adult hegemony and established practice' (1997: 36). Indeed, 'despite the recognition of children as persons in their own right, public policy and practice is marked by an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance around children' (Prout, 2000: 304), this impeding rather than facilitating the ability of social institutions to encourage children's participation. Ambivalence is, perhaps, the dominant lens through which adult society regards children growing up – encompassing hopes that this generation will right the wrongs of the parent generation but also fears that today's youth exemplifies the loss of values, standards and traditions of which the parent generation has been guardian. Beck argues that today, 'the child is the source of the last *remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship*' (1986/2005: 118); he suggests that it is through our children that we seek the 're-enchantment' of our lives (see also Drotner, 1992, on childhood as 'paradise lost' for adults).

These paradoxes and ambivalences, tensions and challenges are not only debated by historians, sociologists and psychologists, but they also motivate the policy agenda. There are, it seems, increasing policy and legislative efforts to improve the conditions of childhood. In America, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* seeks to 'close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind'.[3] In 2004 the UK Government passed the Children Act and published its paper *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (HM Government, 2004), the aims of which include the right of a child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support required to be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve,

make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Unicef argues that 'the true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children' (UNICEF, 2007: 1). And the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is internationally recognized and referred to, if not always implemented.

Concrete evidence of some of the difficulties faced by children and parents may stimulate the public policy agenda more than abstract concerns with tradition, respect, values and identity, though social scientists know these latter to underpin the former. In the UK, the Risk Commission (Madge and Barker, 2007) reported that each year, for every million children, six are abducted by a stranger (though less than one is murdered by a stranger), 24 are killed by a car and 2,400 are involved in a road accident, 40,000 are sexually abused by a parent, relative or carer, around 50,000 11–15 year olds have severe gambling difficulties, 140,000 2–10 year olds are obese, and 270,000 10–25 year olds say they have been the victim of crime in the previous year. Collishaw *et al.* (2004) report that children's mental health problems doubled from 1974 to 1999. The mental health charity, Mind, adds that 1 in 10 children aged 5 to 15 had a clinically diagnosed mental health problem in 2004; 'at least five per cent of teenagers are seriously depressed and at least twice that number show significant distress'; further, 'self-harm is becoming increasingly common among young people' and 'suicide is now the second most common cause of death amongst young people. The suicide rate for young males has risen by over 50 per cent over the past 20 years' (Darton, 2005; see also ONS, 2007). These are just some of the recent reports evidencing the difficulties of contemporary childhood, and they lead some to call the situation a 'crisis' (Palmer, 2007), though others demur (Buckingham, 2007a).

Given this complex and multifaceted picture of changing childhoods, my present purpose is to identify the wider social and cultural shifts which, in practical terms, lead children and young people to embrace the media as a specific and valued opportunity for freedom of expression and connection and, more ideologically, have also generated a public agenda of hopes and fears regarding childhood that are easily grafted onto cultural discourses surrounding the internet.

Individualization and the risk society

> The reflexive project of the self . . . consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives. (Giddens, 1991: 5)

> The goal of individual self-realisation overshadows community solidarity and stability. (Gadlin, 1978: 236)

Comparing the 1950s with the 1980s, Ziehe (1994: 2) argues that the new consumer opportunities of post-war Western societies, framed in terms of ambivalent desires for ever higher domestic and personal living standards, have generated 'an increasing orientation towards questions of life style' now evident in discourses of youth, cultural change and the generation gap. While Ziehe stresses the importance of music, for Osgerby (1998) television is also crucial as it has addressed young people distinctively in terms of their identity, lifestyle and attitudes, encouraging their construction of a leisure career that, being itself subject to pervasive market forces and peer pressures, is perceived by parents as making them 'grow up faster and earlier' while postponing adult responsibilities for longer. The diversity of niche connections afforded by the internet takes this separation of child and adult interests a step further, opening up a world of communication that the parent generation is barely aware of (Fornäs and Bolin, 1995).

As Meyrowitz (1985) and Postman (1983) observed, the mass media gave children unprecedented access to the adult world, blurring the adult/child boundary of knowledge. Yet the concomitant rise of youth culture suggests that children wish to know but not necessarily to engage with that new knowledge about adult society. Rather, they seem more motivated to seek out and experiment with identities and relationships within a peer-realm often inaccessible to the parental gaze. For Gergen (2002: 233), this shift in focus from vertical (cross-generational) to horizontal (peer) relationships is far from the democratic shift proposed by Giddens; rather it is resulting in 'a wholesale devaluation of depth in relationship' as youth becomes increasingly absorbed in sustaining multiple horizontal connections within their network rather than developing the rich commitments that characterize 'the vertical register' of close relationships with significant and co-present others. The loss of attention has costs in terms of commitment:

> as the communal sources for an identifiable self are diminished, it becomes increasingly difficult to answer the questions of 'who am I?' We move then into a cultural condition in which our identities are increasingly situated, conditional and optional. (p. 234)

Yet Gergen's 'new floating world', dominated by image and spectacle (Debord, 1995) is, for others, a new opportunity to escape the constraints of convention and tradition. In pursing the reflexive 'project

of the self', children and young people are seen to relish particularly the internet as a valued new place for social exploration and self-expression (Holloway and Valentine, 2003). More generally, the combination of young people, positioned betwixt and between public and private spheres, and the media, with their unique power to penetrate private spaces and to construct new publics, is resulting in some ambiguous, exciting yet explosive renegotiations of self and other, private and public (Livingstone, 2005b). The media more than many other cultural resources in their lives, offer the raw materials for a flexible, creative exploration of oneself and others. It is hardly surprising, then, that the media also provide the focus for inter-generational tensions.

Drotner (2000) proposes three distinct ways in which young people may specifically be said to be 'cultural pioneers' in their use of new media technologies, centring on innovation, interaction and integration. Under 'innovation', she notes how young people combine multiple media, multitask, blur production and reception and so make creative use of the opportunities available (see also Bruns, 2008; Ito, 2008). By 'interaction', she points to how young people engage with each other within and through different media and media contents, opening up opportunities for intertextuality and connectivity (see also Fornäs, 2002). And by 'integration', she points to the transformation of the distinction between primary (or face-to-face) and secondary (mass mediated) socialization, resulting in diverse forms of mediated communication (see Thompson, 1995):

> for the young, the media are part of a range of cultural signs available for processes of interpretation that are situated in time and space and dependent on constraints of production, distribution and resources for reception. (Drotner, 2000: 59)

However, the case for this flexibility should not be overstated. The media also seek to position children and young people subtly but firmly according to commercial and other interests. Recognizing that this new opportunity brings its own pressures and constraints, Buchner observes that:

> every child is increasingly expected to behave in an 'individualized way' . . . children must somehow orient themselves to an *anticipated* life course. The more childhood in the family is eclipsed by influences and orientation patterns from outside the family (. . .) the more independent the opportunity (and drive) to making up one's own mind, making one's own choice . . . described here as the *biographization* of the life course. (1990: 77–8)

In seeking to construct a biographical project, and in resolving the series of developmental tasks along the way – entering work, sexual maturity, political enfranchisement and financial independence – communication plays a key role at all stages for young people. On a simple level, the media are available to fill the ever-growing leisure of extended youth. However, the media are far from neutral observers on the sidelines of change. Importantly, the media have remade themselves in recent decades – through youth television, pop music, globalized children's culture, the expanding magazine market and video games – precisely to serve, or exploit, children's needs in 'growing up' (Brown, Halpern and L'Engle, 2005; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Kinder, 1999; Kline, 1993). Through their contents, the media directly address the concerns, interests and experiences of young people. Through their forms, the media provide the personalized, mobile, stylized, casualized media goods that today mark out the spaces and timetable of young people's lives.

Since not only the conditions of childhood but also communicative environments are changing in late modernity, so too are the contexts for the development of identity. Identities are increasingly defined through the often transient markers of lifestyle and media practices rather than the traditional, typically stable markers of age, gender, ethnicity and place. And increasingly, identities are performed under conditions of uncertainty, compared with the rich multimodal dynamic information typical of face-to-face interaction (Merchant, 2006). Such changes are productively theorized as part of a long-term historical trend towards individualization discernable even by the end of the seventeenth century, when one could already identify 'the privatization of families from each other, and the individualization of members within families' (Luke, 1989: 39). Defining individualization as the process by which traditional social distinctions – especially social class – are declining in importance as the factors shaping people's lives, this disembedding from tradition is resulting in a fragmentation or undermining of the norms and values which have, hitherto, defined how people live their lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

Life choices are increasingly 'governed by a dialectic of disintegration and reinvention' (Elliott, 2002: 298), this on the one hand arousing popular fears of the selfish, 'me-generation' but, on the other, suggesting new freedoms through self-actualization and intensified reflexivity. Ambivalence regarding individualization is perhaps inevitable. Beck may read as if he celebrates individualization as a form of 'empowerment', but in repudiating this reading he comes close to the Foucauldian notion of rationalities of the self (or governance of

the soul; Rose, 1990). He argues, first, that in late modernity social stratification is far from erased: 'these detraditionalizations happen in a *social surge of individualization*. At the same time the *relations* of inequality remain stable' (Beck, 1986/2005: 87) – an apparent contradiction made possible by what Beck terms the advent of 'capitalism *without* classes' (p. 88). Second, he argues that:

> individualism does not signify the beginning of the self-creation of the world by the resurrected individual. Instead it accompanies tendencies toward the *institutionalization* and *standardization* of ways of life . . . All of this points to the special forms of control which are being established here. (Beck, 1986/2005: 90)

And, a third reason not to celebrate, we can only identify opportunities for 'novel personal experimentation and cultural innovation against a social backdrop of risks, dangers, hazards, reflexivity, globalization' (Elliot, 2002: 298). Indeed, individualization is fraught with risk because the biography must be constructed in a context of loss of traditional certainties, growing inequalities and insecurities, and a tendency to blame the individual when things go wrong. Choices involve weighing risks, and more choice means more risk (Giddens, 1995). Or as Beck put it, modernity 'has become the threat *and* the promise of emancipation from the threat that it creates itself' (Beck, 1986/2005: 183). Thus:

> we are eye-witnesses – as subjects and objects – of a break within modernity, which is freeing itself from the contours of the classical industrial society and forging a new form – the (industrial) 'risk society'. This requires a delicate balancing between the contradictions of continuity and rupture within modernity. (p. 9)

He identifies three historical steps towards the risk society: the disembedding (i.e. the removal of, or perhaps liberation from) tradition; the loss of traditional security (loss of faith, undermining of practical knowledge or societal norms, in short, a growth of disenchantment) and last, the re-embedding (reintegration through new forms of social commitment – to expertise, to new social movements, to community and peer groups). Although neither Giddens nor Beck devote much attention to the changing conditions of childhood in particular, others have developed their thinking so as to provide a framework for understanding the position of children and youth in a wider context. Jackson and Scott observe that:

> taken together, these two processes – individualization and de-traditionalization – create a context in which greater parental investment in children occurs within what seems to be a less predictable and less safe world. In addition, colonization of the future has made space for specific anxieties in relation to children. (1999: 89)

Perhaps the dominant source of perceived risk posed to children, again marking a notable change from just a few decades ago, concerns that associated with public space. Over the second half of the twentieth century, many Western societies have witnessed a gradual shift away from children's leisure time spent outside (in the streets, woods or countryside) and towards that spent primarily at home, this both reflecting and shaping cultural conceptions of childhood over the past half century.[4] Interviews with parents about their own childhoods reveal a pervasive image of a carefree childhood spent out of doors (Livingstone, 2002). Nostalgic though this may be, historians of childhood confirm the:

> shift from a life focused on the street to one focused on the home [and] this was accompanied by a change in the social organization of the home. Parents, and in particular fathers, became less remote and authoritarian, less the centre of attention when they were present. (Cunningham, 1995: 179)

This transformation has been significantly led by a growing culture of risk. For example, in 1971, 80 per cent of British 7–8 year olds walked to school on their own; by 1990 this had dropped to 9 per cent (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1990). In 2007, the Children's Society reported that 43 per cent of UK adults say children should not be allowed out with friends until they are 14 (The Children's Society, 2007). As the outside is increasingly construed as 'unsafe' for children and as opportunities for outside play are commensurately reduced (Gill, 2007), the home becomes a sanctuary for children's safe exploration and leisure, this resulting in pressure on the family to embrace a media-rich home in compensation (Burdette and Whitaker, 2005; Karsten and van Vliet, 2006; Livingstone, 2002).

Growing up in late modernity

Thus far I have treated the category 'children and young people' as homogenous though this is far from the case in reality. Yet attending to the differences among children is troublesome. In presenting empirical findings, all claims must be qualified according to gender, socioeconomic status and many further subdivisions. Further, in terms of theory, there is particular contestation over how to address the main factor that divides children, that of age.

For the new sociologists of childhood, 'childhood is socially constructed rather than being intrinsic to the state of being a child' (Jackson and Scott, 1999: 91). For developmental psychologists, childhood is precisely defined in large part by the state of being a child, this focusing attention on the complex process of individual development. One might say, in conciliation, that the former are interested in cultural, historical and discursive factors shaping childhood while, separately, the latter are interested in the biological, cognitive and social factors that shape the development of each child. Yet it remains the case that little rapprochement has been achieved between these two persistently polarized approaches to researching 'children and young people'. Each persistently misunderstands the other – sociologists accuse psychologists of asserting a universalistic, invariant, decontextualized approach; psychologists consider that sociologists are unable to conceive that development has any basis other than that constructed *ad hoc* by a particular culture. Although neither is in reality so simplistic in its theorization, each offers a strongly contrasting conception of children and, therefore, a competing approach to analysis.

Piaget's developmental psychology has provided one dominant research paradigm (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969), with the focus on the individual child's cognitive development in 'ages and stages' through an active and curious exploration of the environment, including the media environment (Dorr, 1986; Valkenburg, 2004). Its strength is a careful account of children's interests and abilities at different ages, including a theory of developmental transitions from one age to the next. Its weakness is a relative neglect of the ways in which the process of development towards adulthood is shaped by the activities, expectations and resources of a host of socializing agencies and institutions – parents, teachers, technology and content providers, marketers, welfare bodies, politicians, governments. The importance of these in mediating social relations, including providing a social 'scaffolding' for learning, is now being articulated by those following Vygotsky (1978) as noted below.

The new sociology of childhood emerged in the 1990s as a reaction against Piagetian individualism and universalism (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Qvortrup (1994) characterizes this approach as stressing, first, the structural aspects of childhood, with its dynamics and determinants, rather than a naturalistic conception of the individual child and its development; second, the relational – neither 'the child'

in isolation from others, nor 'the household' as sufficiently descriptive of its members, and these relationships are worthy of study in and of themselves; and third, the present – children as people now, their relationships and cultures considered worthy of study in their own right, rather than forward looking – children as merely persons-to-be and so as indicative of the adults they will become. Thus Corsaro (1997) observes that through their daily actions, often invisible to adult eyes, children construct their social worlds as real places where real meanings (rather than fantasy or imitation) are generated, and thus they contribute to social structures which have consequences for both children and adults. This involves, too, a politicization of childhood: childhood is seen as not only a demographic but also as a moral classification which is central to the project of making children count and so addressing their needs and rights when apportioning the resources of society (Qvortrup, 1994).

These two approaches result in polarized approaches to children and the internet. On one view, children are seen as vulnerable, undergoing a crucial but fragile process of cognitive and social development to which the internet tends to pose a risk by introducing potential harms into the social conditions for development, justifying in turn a protectionist regulatory environment. On the contrary view, children are seen as competent and creative agents in their own right whose 'media-savvy' skills tend to be underestimated by the adults around them, the consequence being that society may fail to provide a sufficiently rich environment for them. As both approaches generate hopes and fears, four distinct positionings for children may be discerned:

	Active	*Passive*
Hopes	Agent	Beneficiary
Fears	Villain	Victim

In understanding children and the internet, each is useful in moderation but problematic when framed in a strong form. To be sure, children cannot be fitted into just one of these boxes; rather the challenge is to keep all four possibilities in mind when asking questions in research.

But this classification does not advance our analysis of the problematics of age and development. Moving child psychology away from Piaget's stage theory of cognitive development, Goswami reported to the UK's Byron Review as follows:

> It is now recognized that children think and reason in the *same* ways as adults from early in childhood. Children are less efficient reasoners than adults because they are more easily misled in their logic by interfering variables such as contextual variables, and because they are worse at inhibiting irrelevant information . . . The major developmental change during the primary years is the development of self-regulatory skills . . . Cognitive development is experience-dependent, and older children have had more experiences than younger children. (Goswami, 2008: 1–2)

To understand how experiences – framed as social and contextual – underpin learning and development, psychologists increasingly turn to Vygotsy's intersubjectivist approach that recognizes the social, symbolic and material mediations that underpin development, itself now reconceived as a life-long process rather than one that reaches a state of adult completion by the end of adolescence (see Bruner, 1996; Erstad and Wertsch, 2008; Wertsch, 1985). Crook characterizes this socio-cultural perspective as a means of re-connecting cognition with social interaction through Vygotsky's radical proposal that:

> all hidden mental actions were first experienced within the external plane of joint activity. So, at first, attending, remembering and reasoning are things done between people. Most powerfully, they are done between experts and novices, teachers and learners. (Crook, 2008: 32)

Starting, then, not with the individual child but rather with the community of practice in which they are embedded, and asking not how they externalize what they know but rather how they internalize (via the notion of inner speech) what they and others are doing (and discussing), the traditional problem dividing psychologists and sociologists can be transcended, perhaps rendered obsolete. An exciting challenge for media research, then, is to explore how far the media, especially the internet, play a role in reconfiguring the communities of practice within which children experience themselves and the world, potentially supporting particular peer-based or networked structures of intersubjective communication and scaffolding learning through appropriately (or inappropriately) designed representations with which children interact.

Another psychologist, also one who wrote many years ago but, ironically perhaps, finds renewed relevance for the contemporary analysis of youth in late modernity is helpful in understanding the passage from childhood through to adolescence and adulthood. Erikson (1959/1980) foregrounds as central to development the process by which adolescents and young adults construct an emotionally satisfying, culturally meaningful, materially feasible, socially connected 'self'. Writing in the psychoanalytic tradition, he argued that actions commonly construed as risk-taking or even delinquent are, rather, part of the struggle of identity development, a

struggle in which the adolescent must develop and gain confidence in an ego identity that is simultaneously autonomous and socially valued, and that reflexively balances inner unity with societal expectations. Critical of a society that construes identity in terms of an abundance of choice, while allowing its youth so little power to make meaningful choices, insisting instead on standardization of norms and roles, Erikson observes a painful oscillation between conformity and rebellion. At times,

> Youth after youth, bewildered by some assumed role, a role forced on him by the inexorable standardization of American adolescence, runs away in one form or another. (Erikson, 1959/1980: 97)

At other times,

> to keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds. On the other hand, they become remarkable clannish, intolerant, and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different'. (p. 97)

Problematically for adult society, the extended youth characteristic of late modernity seems to stretch too far the 'psychosocial moratorium' which has traditionally permitted adolescents to experiment with identities or delay life decisions. On the one hand, they are subject to persistent critique from adults who deplore the various forms of youth culture; on the other hand, the psychological task of constructing the self is increasingly left to adolescents to manage for themselves, without the structures established in traditional societies (strong age-related norms for behaviour, acknowledged public rites of passage; Douglas, 1966). Interestingly, as we shall see in this book, the media and especially the internet seem to compensate, constructively or otherwise, by providing many of the resources for explorations of identity, emotion and sexuality, for experimentation with self-disclosure, trust and reciprocity, for negotiating the balance between conformity and rebellion, and for reinventing rites of passage (now taking the form of acquiring a mobile phone, seeing a porn movie, getting a MySpace profile).

The 'arrival' of the internet

Where does the internet fit into this picture? Although it has only recently reached mass adoption in households with children in developed countries, the internet has a history stretching over nearly half a century – back to ARPANET's first decentralized communications network in 1969, if not still further back (Castells, 2001; Winston, 1996). Each step in its development has attracted considerable hopes and fears, initially among its elite developers, funders and users, more latterly also among the wider public. Email was introduced in 1975, followed by usenet and bulletin board services, a series of interim innovations born of interactions between scientists and hackers in the 1970s, then Unix users' tradition of the 'open source movement' during the 1980s. It took the development of hypertext language by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989, the first client browser software in 1991 leading to the World Wide Web, to bring the internet widespread recognition beyond the technological elite. At the end of that year, US Senator (later, Vice-President) Al Gore (1991) attracted worldwide attention to 'the information superhighway' when announcing the huge public and private investment to be concentrated in the 'national information infrastructure', and this was soon followed by Microsoft's introduction of the Windows browser Microsoft Internet Explorer in 1995.

By the mid to late 1990s, the internet was fast becoming an everyday technology, reaching sizable proportions of homes, schools and workplaces in the developed world. Internet diffusion in the USA took just seven years to reach 30 per cent of households, a level of penetration which took 17 years for television and 38 years for the telephone (Rice and Haythornthwaite, 2006). This rapidity is in itself distinctive. I recall a girl asking me in 1997, 'Isn't it [the internet] something you plug into the back of the TV?' In a survey of British 6–17 year olds I conducted that year, only one in five had used the internet – with only 7 per cent having home access, and one in five had not even heard of it (Livingstone, 2002). In short, the arrival of the internet in people's lives has required some fast footwork to figure out what it is, how to use it and what to do when difficulties arise. Just a decade or so on, many children – and adults – say they could not live without it.

Today, 86 per cent of Norwegians, 74 per cent of Japanese, 73 per cent of Americans, 71 per cent of Britons and 67 per cent of Germans are online, although there remain many parts of the world where access is low or absent, according to the usage website, worldinternetstats.com (see also Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008, which concurs that three quarters of American adults are online, and Oxis, 2007, for evidence that 66 per cent of households had an internet connection, and 56 per cent had broadband, in the UK in 2007). Despite the rapidity of the diffusion process, there remain

considerable cross-national differences (Norris, 2001; World Internet Project, 2009) and, notwithstanding the turn to broadband and a continual upgrading of speed and connectivity, a notable levelling-off in the proportion of households gaining access.

Although everybody is affected, in one way or another, by the very ubiquity of new online technologies, children and young people are usually among the earliest and most enthusiastic users of information and communication technologies. Households with children are significantly more likely to have access than others (Ofcom, 2007b)[5] and ever younger children are now going online, often 'ahead' of their parents.

- By the time the UK Children Go Online survey was conducted, 98 per cent of children aged 9–19 had used the internet – 92 per cent at school, 75 per cent at home, and 64 per cent elsewhere (Livingstone and Bober, 2004b). By 2009, 79 per cent of 7–16 year olds had gained internet access at home, one third having access in their own room (ChildWise, 2009).
- The World Internet Project (2009) found similarly that among 12–14 year olds internet use was 95 per cent or over in the UK, Canada, the Czech Republic and Israel.
- In Europe, internet use is rising even for younger children – among 6–10 year olds, use reached 77 per cent in Sweden, 88 per cent in Finland, 57 per cent in Romania, 56 per cent in Germany and 34 per cent in Italy. The overall average for 6–17 year olds in the EU27 now stands at 75 per cent (Eurobarometer, 2008).
- In the USA, 99 per cent of 12–18 year olds use the internet (Cole, 2007). Further, 78 per cent of those aged 2–17 have internet access at home and 13 per cent have access in their bedroom (Rideout, 2007).

The ways in which the internet is becoming embedded in everyday life raises questions about access and inequalities, about the nature and quality of use, about the implications for young people's social and educational development and, ultimately, about the balance between the risks and opportunities posed by the internet for children and their families. As is often argued, children appear to be more flexible, creative users than adults, having fewer established routines or habits and being oriented towards development, innovation, and change (Ito, 2008). As they make the transition from their family of origin towards a wider peer culture, young people find that the media, especially mobile media and the internet, offer a valued resource for constructing their identity and for mediating social relationships (Peter, Valkenbury and Fluckiger, in press). And in so doing, they are developing online competencies and literacies that exceed those of

their parents, proudly labelling themselves 'the internet generation' (Livingstone and Bober, 2003), this mirroring popular rhetoric regarding youthful 'cyberkids', 'digital natives' or 'the digital generation' (Prensky, 2001).[6]

But the internet is not just a new appliance in the household akin to getting a washing machine or a new car. Crucially, the communication environment is diversifying, specializing, globalizing and becoming more interactive. The internet encompasses not simply one-to-many communication (also characteristic of the mass media and, in turn, of mass society) and one-to-one communication (as in telephony and in face-to-face communication, and characteristic of the yet longer history of oral culture), but also the communication from many to many distinctively characteristic of a network society (Castells, 2001). This resulting expansion of communicative possibilities extends further into our lives than could be said for any other recently arrived screen entertainment technologies. But, like the telegraph and telephone (Carey, 1992) as well as the book, the internet permeates all spheres of life, connecting public and private in significantly altered ways – arguably more even than was the case for television (Dayan, 2001; Ellis, 2002) – and so contributing to the reconfiguration of opportunities and risks in children's lives in relation to social, cultural, educational, civic, health and, still important, leisure activities.

The internet is not, however, being introduced into otherwise unchanging households. Historians of media consumption show that, in a market fuelled by the continual innovation and multiplication of media goods, as each new medium enters the home, it undergoes a gradual transition from pride of place at the centre of family life to a variable status pitched somewhere between focal and casual, communal and individualized uses, where these are spread spatially throughout the household and temporally round-the-clock (Flichy, 1995; Livingstone, 2002; Mackay, 1997; Spigel, 1992; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). Each new medium remediates previous media, with the latter moving gradually into the background to make way for the newest arrival, possibly becoming more specialized in its use, although its taken-for-granted presence continues to permeate our lives (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Consider the shift from 'family television' (Morley, 1986) to a screen-rich 'bedroom culture' (Livingstone, 2007c; see also Lincoln, 2004) with its own television installed for the majority of children (and adults) in Western homes – and a similar story has been told for radio, telephone, hi-fi, video recorders and computers. Each has begun its domestic career in the main collective family space of the living room but, as prices fall and multiplication and mobility of goods becomes feasible, each has moved into more individualized,

personalized and, for children, unsupervised spaces, resulting in what Flichy (1995) termed 'living together separately' and what van Rompaey and Roe (2001) termed the 'compartmentalization of family life'.

While the internet has often entered homes intended for communal use in the living room, it too is migrating to more specialized and personalized locations around the home. In terms of space, the decision for many households is no longer whether to have the internet but rather how many connections to have and where to locate them in the home, facilitated by a continual process upgrading and recycling existing technologies through the household. As desktops give way to laptops, mobile and other platforms, even these decisions become unnecessary as access becomes ever more flexible. Similarly in terms of time, we no longer divide our time between media and other activities but rather we use media as a way of structuring many of our activities, both commonplace and special (Bryce, 1987; Scannell, 1988). These altered time–space conditions for everyday life reshape social relations, and here the trends are towards individualization, privatization, personalization. In understanding these processes, we should not only focus on media as objects of consumption. As with other media, the internet is not only a material resource that occupies space and time in the household; it is more significantly a symbolic force that renegotiates the boundary between home and outside, also altering the relations of audiences (or users) and producers from the established institutional separation that long characterized mass broadcasting.

Online, content creation is easier than ever: one and the same technology can be used for sending and receiving, with desktop publishing software, easy-to-use web creation software, digital cameras and webcams putting professional expertise into the hands of everyone (Bruns, 2008). Many are already content producers, developing complex literacy skills through the use of email, chat or games and the social consequences of these activities – participation, social capital, civic culture – serve to network (or exclude) in ways that matter. On the other hand, a consequence of this network society is the increasing mediation of relations that were hitherto conducted face-to-face, exacerbating problems of credibility, expertise, reciprocity, alienation, trust. What does this mean for relations between individuals and institutions? For critical literacy as a means of 'reading the world' (Freire and Macedo, 1987)? Ironically, overwhelmed with complex and uncertain information, many seek powerful intermediaries, old and new, to manage these difficult judgements for them, and thus established institutions – often those already powerful

in the mass media – regain any lost power, now no longer acting quietly in the background but, on the contrary, highly visible and trusted brands from both public and private sector.

But these are grand claims. To defend or, better, examine them, we must first rethink their framing so as firmly to avoid naive claims about the impact of the internet, instead contextualizing the internet within the society that has produced it.

From impacts to affordances

> We know the computer, we're the generation of computers. (Focus group with 14–16 year olds, London, 2003)

> Technology is an essential and inescapable part of 21st Century living and learning. All aspects of school life are enhanced and enabled with technology. Technology is crucial to making sure that each individual maximizes their potential through the personalization of their learning and development. (Department for Education and Skills, 2006: 5)

For the general public, including children, and for policymakers, the very salience of the internet in society supports the popular positioning of the technology itself as the self-evident agent of change – whether this is evaluated as for better or for worse. Discursively, if the term 'internet' (or its equivalents – digital, cyber, technological) is put at the start of the sentence (as in, 'What's the impact of the internet on . . .?') or used as a strong qualifier (digital childhood, cyberkids, technological literacy), this masks the social arrangements of institutions (education, family, commerce, state) and the shaping role of everyday activities and practices. Yet it is these activities and practices that, for example, led educators to turn to technology over print, governments to promote domestic internet adoption, universities to develop the internet as a decentralized network, and families to encourage their children to become internet users.

In short, a focus on the impacts of the internet leads the argument astray in several ways. First, it is theoretically incoherent, as the many scholars who have critiqued technological determinism have forcefully argued. Rejecting the assumption that 'new technologies are invented as it were in an independent sphere, and then create new societies or new human conditions' (Williams, 1974: 13), studies of the social shaping of technology stress that 'the technological, instead of being a sphere separate from social life, is part of what makes society possible' (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 23; Selwyn, 2008). MacKenzie and Wajcman further distinguish between technological

determinism as a theory of technology and as a theory of society. As the former, technological determinism fails: technological innovation is a thoroughly social process, from conception, design, production, marketing, diffusion, appropriation, use and consequences (Mansell and Silverstone, 1996). But as a theory of society and social change, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999: 3) argue that technological determinism contains 'a partial truth'. Provided it is understood that technologies are social products which embed human relations in their very constitution, we may as a matter of convenience cast them in the role of actors, along with other kinds of actor, when explaining social processes (although see Latour, 1993). Crucially,

> precisely because technological determinism is partly right as a theory of society (technology matters not just physically and biologically, but also to our human relations to each other), its deficiency as a theory of technology impoverishes the political life of our societies. (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999: 5)

Second, it is empirically unsatisfactory, for it leads us to miss the many social processes of everyday life by which people themselves shape the significance and consequences of internet use. As statisticians chart the rise in internet access across and within countries, and as governments rely on the public to gain access at home, evidence for the gradual diffusion of the internet from the 'innovators' and 'early adopters' through the mass market until eventually reaching the 'laggards' is readily obtained (Rogers, 1995). But this neat account of the spread of a more-or-less stable technology through the market – which invites questions about technology's impacts and consequences – is quickly complicated and qualified once one explores the nature of use, for the internet itself means different things to different users and at different points in the passage through design, production, marketing, consumption and use (Silverstone, 2006). Beyond the obvious practical and financial barriers that face ordinary users, ethnographic studies of technology use and domestic consumption practices draw attention to the symbolic struggles involved in going online, struggles that reshape the very meaning of the technology through contingent processes of use (to be explored in chapter 2).

Third, it misleads policy, for it positions technology *per se*, rather than the institutions that design, fund and shape the technology and its implementation in children's lives, as the solution to social problems. Indeed, the very multifunctionality of the internet increases the range of problems to which it is seen to provide a solution. So, when politicians worry that youth is becoming politically apathetic, they

hope online forums can revise youthful participation. When educationalists want to move on from traditional notions of learning, they seize upon the idea that e-learning offers an exciting answer. When health educators wish to advise teenagers about health, sex or drugs, they hope an anonymous advice site will circumvent the embarrassments of face-to-face guidance. These are not necessarily misplaced hopes, but they are ill-framed, for they underestimate the social and contextual factors surrounding the problem, especially the roles to be played by social actors in using the technology, content or service to address the problem (the teacher training requirements associated with introducing information and communication technologies into the classroom, for example) as well as the unintended consequences of relying on a technological solution (the difficulty of ensuring the comprehension or effectiveness of health advice provided for unknown users, for example).

How, then, shall we understand the internet in social terms? Beyond an account of the internet as a technology – a material bundle of hardware and software that is designed and sold, installed and used – the internet is also, indeed is more significant in terms of communication. All forms of media, from print to the internet, mediate between speaker and hearer, producer and audience, or among interacting parties. In contrast, with face-to-face communication, characterized by co-presence, they enable the considerable advantages of communication on any scale, even the global, as well as those of asynchronicity, anonymity and more. The contemporary conceptual toolkit centres on the prefix 're-'; remixing, reconfiguring, remediating, reappropriating, recombining (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Dutton and Shepherd, 2004; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). This recognizes the activities by which innovations are rendered both continuous with and distinct from that which has gone before, simultaneously remediating the familiar; a focus on mediation also adopts a frame of enabling and constraining rather than of determining or causing, focusing on the interpretative potential of technology as text (Woolgar, 1996) and the interpretative activities of designers and users (Bakardjieva, 2005; Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987).

Convergent media culture is characterized by personalization, hypersociality, networking and ubiquity, all of which engages the collective imagination and affords new 'genres of participation' (Ito, 2008; Jenkins, 2006a; Jensen and Helles, 2005). At the same time, this move away from a reliance on the face-to-face situation introduces a radical degree of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of the communication – both from the point of view of the intentions or ambitions of the speaker and the responsiveness of the hearer. Speakers

may lose authority and authenticity, and so find it difficult to establish trust. Hearers become unpredictable, from the speakers' viewpoint, and may more easily disrupt, resist or simply ignore the message. Both parties lose the flexibility of a face-to-face situation. And the effects of the medium itself, as well as the institution behind it, often act to stabilize, standardize or commodify the message. Even though, in practice, face-to-face communication can, of course, be angry, negligent, resistant, deceitful or inflexible, somehow it remains the ideal against which mediated communication is judged as flawed.

In support of this rethinking of the way in which both people and technologies mediate communication, Hutchby draws on Gibson's ecological psychology to replace technological determinist claims with an analysis of technological affordances, suggesting that:

> affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. (2001: 44)[7]

Even the very infelicity of reframing questions of 'impacts' with questions of 'affordances' insists upon inclusion of both processes of social shaping ('shaping by and shaping of') in any social inquiry about technology. As Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003: 1–2) observe:

> There may be one dominant use of a technology, or a prescribed use, or a use that confirms the manufacturer's warranty, but there is no one essential use that can be deduced from the artifact itself.

Hence the importance of studying technologies in use (Bakardjieva, 2005; du Gay, Hall, Janes and Mackay, 1997; Selwyn, 2003; Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992). A simple example is that of the Sim Series software designed to promote public values – supposedly teaching children 'about pollution, city planning, and the creation of healthy environments' (Calvert, 1999: 186). Yet as any parent of a pre-teen knows, such software is gleefully played 'against the grain' – destroying the city, encouraging urban destruction, experimenting with the means of killing the inhabitants – in other words, precisely subverting such public values (Reid-Walsh, 2008).

A further, albeit equally infelicitous semantic distinction adds to the analysis by distinguishing individual acts of communication from the institutional structures that systematically shape communication in particular ways and in furtherance of particular powerful interests.

Distinguishing 'mediation' from 'mediatization', Hjarvard proposes that:

> mediation refers to the communication through one or more media through which the message and the relation between sender and receiver are influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific media and genres involved . . . Mediatization is the process of social change that to some extent subsumes other social or cultural fields to the logic of the media. (Hjarvard, 2008: 5)

Although, in my view, 'mediation' can encompass both meanings (Livingstone, 2009), this quotation stresses two useful points. First, all communication is mediated, necessarily, for it inevitably occurs through one or another channel or medium (including language and bodily or nonverbal face-to-face interaction) which has its own influence (Silverstone, 2005). This demands an empirical account of the specific forms and practices associated with a communication medium – whether social networking sites or fanzines, telephones or the printed book. Second, the specific affordances and constraints of specific media may be shaped by a distinctive logic whose character is established historically and culturally through the development not only of practices and technologies but also of institutions of power and whose sphere of influence extends far beyond the specific mode of communication they control.

To illustrate, both the book and the social networking site have their own characteristics that afford certain activities on the part of their readers or users. But print culture – associated with institutions of learning, the accreditation of knowledge, standards of expertise, and so forth – has a 'logic' (or logics) whose influence is far-reaching, 'mediatizing' the spheres of education and work (Luke, 1989; Thompson, 1995). Online communication forms also mediate specific activities, shaping them in certain ways, affording some opportunities over others; but whether they also constitute something as grand as a new digital culture or network society, thereby mediatizing other spheres of social life remains to be established. As Lundby puts it,

> mediatization implies that the media influence social institutions in ways that exceed the simple fact that all institutions rely increasingly on mediated information and communication. (2008: 363)

This requires a social and cultural analysis that contextualizes the changing array of communicative modes in relation to the variously complementary or contradictory processes of social change underway in late modernity.

From great expectations to challenging realities

In contrast to many public fears and some policy claims, the consensus among academic researchers is that the internet, being socially shaped by the diverse political, economic and cultural contexts of its development, distribution and use, is implicated in multiple and concurrent evolutionary rather than revolutionary processes of social change, variously affording the recombination, reconfiguration and remediation of everyday social practices, forms of knowledge and institutional structures (Haddon, 2004).

As was also argued in relation to television – recall Hall's (1980) analysis of the disjunctions between the contexts of encoding and the contexts of decoding – information and communication mediated by the internet cannot be reduced to a model of linear, one-way effects in which messages as intended reach users as anticipated. Hence the persistent sense of uncertainty, newness and anxiety associated with the internet. When inquiring into the internet's significance for society, simple answers and straightforward predictions should not be expected, because although new media:

> are usually created with particular purposes or uses in mind, they are commonly adopted and used in unanticipated ways – reinvented, reconfigured, sabotaged, adapted, hacked, ignored. (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006: 5)

Great expectations abound regarding children and the internet. Optimists relish new opportunities for self-expression, sociability, community engagement, creativity and new literacies. For children, it is hoped that the internet can support new forms of learning, new ways of thinking even, and that it can overcome political apathy among the young. Pessimists foresee the expanded scope for state surveillance, commercial exploitation and harmful or criminal activities. For children, it is feared that the internet is introducing new risks and harms into their lives – commercial, sexual, ideological, abusive. The fears may dominate the newspaper headlines, and they are readily expressed by parents, teachers and children themselves. But it is the great expectations that are driving internet adoption and use at the level of government policy, commercial enterprise, community provision and domestic consumption.

Popular discourses tend to float freely above the everyday realities of children's internet experiences, occasionally acknowledging puzzled dismay that young people live in such a different world from the (nostalgically remembered) youth of today's adults. Too often they 'essentialize the child category, denying children's diversity and their status as social actors, and because they rest on technologically determinist understandings of ICT' (Holloway and Valentine, 2003: 72; see also Buckingham, 2007a). As this chapter has suggested, in theoretical terms, the new sociology of childhood offers a way forward for the former problem, while the sociology of technology and consumption promises to resolve the latter. But theory tends not to capture the public imagination and without strong empirical findings moral panics readily take hold, as they have done many times before, catalyzing society's perennial anxieties about childhood and triggering media headlines, public anxieties and official inquiries. Throughout the twentieth century,

> each new media technology brought with it great promise for social and educational benefits, and great concern for children's exposure to inappropriate and harmful content. (Wartella and Jennings, 2000: 31)

With the shift from mass media to a mixed media ecology, including both mass and also interactive or peer-to-peer media, these promised benefits and moral concerns are exacerbated by new risks – of contact with strangers and of conduct among peers, in addition to new forms of content risks. Bettelheim (1999) traces moral panics about new media back via Goethe's 'Sorrows of Young Werther', blamed for a wave of suicides in eighteenth-century Germany, to Plato's ideal state that banned imaginative literature for corrupting the young. Since even the waltz appeared dissolute when first introduced, it is hardly surprising that public concerns accompanied the arrival of comics, cinema, television, computer games, internet:

> The indecent foreign dance called the *Waltz* was introduced ... at the English Court on Friday last ... It is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs, and close compressure of the bodies ... to see that it is far indeed removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females ... we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion. (*The Times of London*, 1816)

How then to connect the theoretical and empirical frameworks so as to counter moral panics surrounding children and the internet? First, it must be recognized that the research agenda is already hugely broad: as observed from the outset, almost every question asked of children is now being asked of children and the internet. Adopting the overarching lens of opportunities and risks, and setting aside for

the moment the crucial issue of the relations and overlaps between them (though this will be a theme threaded throughout this book), we may scope the agenda thus:

Online opportunities	**Online risks**
Access to global information	Illegal content
Educational resources	Paedophiles, grooming, strangers
Social networking among friends	Extreme or sexual violence
Entertainment, games and fun	Other harmful offensive content
User-generated content creation	Racist/hate material and activities
Civic or political participation	Advertising and stealth marketing
Privacy for identity expression	Biased or misinformation
Community involvement/activism	Abuse of personal information
Technological expertise and literacy	Cyber-bullying/harassment
Career advancement/employment	Gambling, phishing, financial scams
Personal/health/sexual advice	Self-harm (suicide, anorexia)
Specialist groups/fan forums	Invasions/abuse of privacy
Shared experiences with distant others	Illegal activities (hacking, copyright abuse)

Doubtless these lists can be extended further, but already they require research expertise not only in relation to children and the internet but also from the fields of education, information science, criminology, psychology, health, and many more. Each of these fields has dominant theories, its defining debates and its preferred methodologies. In the chapters that follow, we shall see what each has to offer and where further work is needed.

As argued in this introductory chapter, my approach is child-centred more than internet-centred, asking how children's lives afford (or not) the opportunities for certain kinds of activities, including internet-related activities, depending on social arrangements of time, space, cultural norms and values, and personal preferences and lifestyle. This invites recognition of the degree to which children and young people construct their own local contexts, rendering media use meaningful in specific ways, and so not only respond to but also

influence their immediate environment, including their mediated environment (Livingstone, 1998b). As I hope to show, this child-centred, contextualized approach also allows us to recognize what is, perhaps, one of the key contributions of the internet, namely the ways in which it is used to blur the relations among hitherto distinct social spheres, altering the relations between and meanings of long-established oppositions such as public/private, local/global, masculine/feminine, learning/fun, work/leisure, adult/child.

Of course, no one sets out to blur boundaries – that is, rather, a fascinating and important if unintended consequence of other deliberate activities. Children and young people's activities are primarily exploratory, seeking freedoms online that may be constrained offline, negotiating the social expressions of identity, developing new forms of valued expertise, taking risks with social norms and personal experiences and, ultimately, integrating online and offline in developing the 'project of the self' so characteristic of late modernity (Giddens, 1991). The consequences, albeit always complex and contingent, are the youthful cultures of sociality, consumption, sexuality and creativity that do, precisely, mix and remix elements of once-distinct spheres, undermining established oppositions and generating hybrid spaces, activities and modes of expression (Drotner, 2005; Fornäs, 2003; Ito, 2008; Jenkins, 2006b).

As we shall see in the final chapter, these trends towards risky opportunities and youthful expertise, together with the tension between independence and dependence, and the democratization of the family, complicate society's attempts to guide and regulate children's use of the internet. This matters since, although children and young people benefit from the early take-up of new opportunities afforded by the internet and other online or mobile technologies, notwithstanding significant and persistent inequalities in access, use and skill (see chapter 2), the evidence also points to the risk of harm to children's safety and social development (chapter 6). These risks, it seems, are expanding in range, intensity and scope as online contents and services themselves expand and grow, including risk of bullying, sexual harassment, pornography, privacy invasion, race hate, self-harm, physical or symbolic abuse, and so forth (Hasebrink, Livingstone and Haddon, 2009; Internet Satety Technical Task Force, 2008). Here too, children and young people are often in the vanguard, exploring new activities, especially peer networking, in advance of adult scrutiny and regulatory intervention and, perhaps too often, encountering negative experiences that are unanticipated, for which they may be unprepared, and which may challenge their capacity to cope.

In balancing the opportunities and the risks, a critical perspective is vital. This book will persistently question the prioritization, implicit in the currently dominant, celebratory discourse of youthful experts or digital natives, of one side in each of these theoretical polarities – agency over structure (Giddens, 1984), tactics over strategy (de Certeau, 1984), resistance over conformity (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) lifeworld over system world (Habermas, 1981/7). To be sure, we shall explore how children exert agency online, but this will also show that they do so in the context of structures set by others – usually powerful adults, notably parents, teachers, politicians, youth workers, information providers, broadcasters. Children creatively resist some adult pressures but at the same time they succumb to others – commercial pressures that entice and entertain, normative pressures that reward certain kinds of behaviour (e.g. exam revision) over others (e.g. file sharing). Children develop and express new interests but the institutions they address may be unresponsive – politicians who invite youthful feedback but don't act on it, teachers who invite creative expression but can't evaluate it, parents who encourage online exploration but then anxiously constrain it.

In short, while this book will review the many grounds for optimism when observing children and young people as they engage with the internet for learning, communication, participation, creativity and literacy, it will also show that children alone cannot meet society's grand expectations. The everyday realities of children's internet use pose the challenge for us – adults – of drawing out from these realities the lessons that may enable society to meet some of its grand expectations. Two cautions: first, this is not, primarily, a challenge for children but rather for the society in which children live; second, these are not, at heart, great expectations held out for the internet – they are, rather, great expectations held out for children. Herein lie many uncertainties. What world do we imagine children living in, now and in the future? What skills and competences will they need? What kind of people will they be? It is such uncertainties that fuel society's inflated aspirations for children's activities and achievements online. Hence the grand claims – that the internet facilitates a whole new way of thinking, one that is flexible, collaborative, creative, or that learning is now freed from the classroom and children can learn anywhere, anytime, or that community can now encompass the globe and children transcend physical boundaries to reach out to others with shared interests. Understanding the extent to which these are being, and could yet be, realized is the task of this book.

2

Youthful Experts

Great expectations

> It's just like life, you can do anything really. (Lorie, 17)[1]
>
> I think from the children's point of view they are so incredibly lucky to be able to have the information in their dining room . . . and I think they are at an incredible advantage to other children. (Mother of Anna, 10)

Especially in industrialized countries, a story is emerging of 'great expectations' among both parents and children, strongly fostered by governments and business. Are these being realized? What are the real benefits? Despite having acquired a home computer and internet access precisely to improve their child's educational opportunities, parents are both confident and vague as to how this may help, quickly falling back on a faith in authorities ('the school encouraged us'), on a generalized optimism ('computers are the future') or, signifying some considerable anxiety, on peer pressure ('everyone else has got it') or competitive individualism ('I want my child to keep up/get ahead').

This chapter charts the efforts of families to go online at home, while the next chapter focuses on use of the internet in schools. It reveals the range of ways in which children are using the internet and some of the pleasures they derive from it. It also reveals, however, the difficulties of 'going online', as ordinary families navigate the many, sometimes unexpected, often confusing or contested decisions involved. Hence, this chapter questions the popular notion of the 'digital native', expert in maximizing the opportunities afforded by