Children, Food and Digital Media: Questions, Challenges and Methodologies

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Abstract

To research digital media use is not a simple project. Contrary to ‘traditional’ audience studies it is difficult even for well-educated grown-ups to describe their actual uses of digital media, for instance what they do, when they ‘just google’ (Povlsen, 2016). It might be even more difficult for children to explain to others what they do on their ipads or smart phones and why and how they select and trust the results they do. Not least in relation to everyday routines and practices such as food. But if we want to take UNCRC’s children’s right to express themselves in all matters seriously, it is also important to understand their media practices – not least related to everyday matters such as food.

From the 1930s studies on children’s media uses have been dominated by didactical concerns and by fear of new media, often termed as ‘media panics’ (Drotner et al.). The concerns from this tradition have been radicalized in the digital revolution. Much research has focused on ‘vulnerable’ audiences that have to be protected. In contrast, audience studies from the 1970s and onwards focus on the negotiations among active audiences. This contrast is also radicalized by digital media, because they are everywhere. An important question therefore is, what methods are suitable? How can we experiment to overcome the special challenges with personal uses of individual digital devices such as smart phones and ipads? The chapter will discuss the pros and cons of different methods for different ages and contexts, giving examples of our Danish research.

Keywords

home economics – cross-disciplinary – collaborative research design – UNCRC article 12 – children’s agency

1 Introduction

This chapter will present the methodological reflections on an emergent iterative research design in a series of interventions in Danish schools in the 6th and 7th grade home economic classes. The research group is cross-disciplinary with two scholars of media studies, one scholar of anthropology, and one of cultural and gender studies. The aim is to present our process towards a collaborative research design, inviting children to participate as co-designers, co-workers, co-producers of data, and creative producers of a first analysis of their experiences in 3-minute YouTube videos. In the project, we position ourselves as researchers in the paradigm of new childhood studies based on ethnographic participative observations of children's competences and agency from the 1990s (James & Prout, 2015), a tradition that has been strong in the Nordic countries after the 1990s (Solberg, 2015). It is also a position that often – as we do here – has focused on the intersections between formal learning in institutions and schools and informal activities in the home with media entertainment and media productions (Drotner, 1995; Povlsen, 1999). The digital media offer new possibilities of inviting children to express their views freely as the article 12 of the UNCHR proposes. Here we experiment with diverse possibilities of communication in an everyday context such as the home economy class. The data produced by the children might give researchers new insights in the explicit and implicit views and experiences, but the digital media productions also pose new challenges.

The book has traditionally been accepted as a media, fitted for learning, but digital and entertaining media might be prohibited or only given limited access in some schools. This media perspective might be especially relevant in the Nordic countries where digital media and curriculum are implemented to a higher degree than in other parts of the world (Eurostat, 2017), but it is also a general challenge for research in matters that involve practices that exist in school and leisure. The schooling systems in the five Nordic countries differ and they differ from the systems in many other parts of the world, but a common trait in the Nordic countries is still a high degree of democracy, participation and problem-based learning. Choosing three different schools in regard to pedagogics, media tolerance and home economics teaching, we will reflect and discuss the most important methodological – as well as empirical – challenges in an iterative, interventional and explorative research design process.

Following the tradition for researching the intersections between formal and informal learning in school and leisure, we wanted to explore the explicit and implicit competences and literacies from routines in children's everyday life, not least in relation to food and media (Potter & Goldsmith, 2017; Shade

et al., 2015) and the relations between the two fields. This is too big a field to explore, so an intrinsic question is, how to establish a real-life ‘research laboratory’ that gives us the possibility to collaborate among four researchers and make a research design together with children in well-known and habitual circumstances. In this chapter, we will focus especially on how we were inspired by iterative research design processes that invite users of software to participate creatively in the design processes until a soft- or hardware can be designed and produced. Our ‘production’, however, is not a model or the development of a fixed research design; it is the iterative research design process itself.

2 Background and Purpose

The interventions were created as a result of our common interest in taste and cooking. All four of us take part in an externally funded research project: Taste for Life (Nordea Foundation, 2014–2018). The big collaborative project (app. 50 participants) focuses on taste education and competencies among children and young people in schools, on festivals and special events etc. (www.smag-forlivet.dk). The field of taste and cooking practices therefore was our common point of departure and an obligatory theme for our interventions. We wanted to explore if and how this field of practice may interact with the field of media practices. Both fields are parts of the everyday lives of most children and young people. Food and cooking are a basic human field of experience and practice. Access to media such as books, newspapers, magazines etc. has for hundreds of years been part of children’s school and leisure life. Today, access to digital media allows children and young people to search for information or to entertain them. Digital media also allows them from an early age to take an active cultural role as producers and distributors on social network media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter and in this case YouTube. Digital media – and food – are accessible everywhere if a digital device is accessible. Both are also publicly debated, and many homes and schools have strict rules for sugar and unhealthy food as they have for smart phones and tablets. Both fields are relevant to all spheres of daily life and both fields are contested in relation to corporeal and mental health, to obesity and stress and depression. Both fields are the subjects of teaching activities and both are fields, where all children might be able to contribute. Which is exactly why we found the possible patterns of relations between the two fields important to explore as an example of how we can investigate the complex relations between practice fields by inviting people – in this case – children – to create and collaborate with us in practices that are limited in time and space.

3 Practice Theory across Two Fields

In media sociology, the methodological tradition and the research design considered 'best practise' is a pre-planned methodological design (e.g. Schröder et al., 2003, Schröder, 2003), inspired by classical sociology (Bryman, 2016). Contrary to this, cultural and visual anthropology has developed traditions of participant or non-participant observations, field studies etc., where the researcher constantly adapts her or his methods to situations and people (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). In recent years, the argument has been made that we need to apply a broader practice-oriented perspective if we wish to understand the role that media play in people's everyday lives (Couldry, 2004; Coudry & Hepp, 2013). Digital media that give access to many traditional media are used seamlessly interwoven with the daily routines and rituals and practices such as for instance cooking. In a medialized society, it makes sense to adapt fluid methodologies from anthropology into media sociology or audience studies and study media-use as part of the wide range of other everyday practices it is normally seamlessly embedded into:

Mediatization is extended into everyday life, at work, at home, and in between. We are still listeners, readers and viewers as we continue to select our individual set of audiences from a more differentiated set of service providers, among them old media, but we are also able to be senders, writers, printers, and producers as part of daily communication, thereby establishing the individual, social, and public connections form our own audiences. (Finnemann, 2011, p. 84)

This is also true for children in the 6th and 7th grade. In our perspective, this has important implications. The interventions we make in the home economic class constitute a setting within which we initiate and partly participate in practices: cooking and video production. We observe and participate in the ways the participants perform these practices through sayings and doings (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2008). We make ad hoc interviews and we take photos and videos; we partake in the children's practices and enact our own practices as researchers, observed by the children that observe and interview us on what we are doing. Working with practices in research gives us an indication of how everyday practices intersect (Orlikowski, 2010; Halkier, 2009), and initiating food and media use/production practices opens up to a vast range of sayings and doings within the fields of food, cooking, taste, media use, competencies, literacy etc. Thus, we work from an understanding that it is not possible to study one practice isolated from other practices – let alone media

practices (or research-practices). In a society vastly mediatized it is seldom possible to study media use isolated from the everyday life that it is part of. Similarly, it is not possible to separate everyday practices or routines from their joining with media practices. Andreas Hepp uses the notion of amalgamation to describe this development: “Amalgamation means that media-related and non-media related acting increasingly merge and mingle” (Hepp, 2012, p. 4). Our study is an example of how we initiate a situation (an intervention) with this amalgamation of media practices and cooking practices – which could be any other non-media related practice. Our purpose is to explore what happens in this imagined and collaborative ‘laboratory’ that mirrors everyday situations but is limited in time and space.

In our perspective, this has two major implications. (1) We must rethink how media studies, anthropology, and other parts of cultural studies intersect methodologically. On the one hand, media use is not a practice detached from other social and cultural practices, but an element in all of these. On the other hand, anthropology and cultural studies have to integrate media into their field, because media use and production often are part of everyday routines. (2) Therefore, studying childhood in the age of digitalisation raises methodological challenges and we have to experiment with new methodological designs that can explore complex and diverse intersections between cooking (or other practices) and media-productions among children in contemporary culture.

Our response to the second implication has been to initiate a participatory design, which is collaboratively developed and changed and refined during the research process. An abductive process took place, alternating between induction (in the fields) and deduction (pre-planning and theoretical pre-understandings, i.e. of which media formats that the children might know). We had to attune the intervention to diverse contexts: the three schools were not just located in different areas of Denmark, the surroundings within the school and particularly in the home economics class were more diverse than imagined. The schools had different perspectives on teaching and using media in learning processes, and the teachers had distinctive ways of interacting with their pupils and us. Also, the children’s media literacy (Drotner & Erstad, 2014; Drotner & Kobbervang, 2014) and culinary capital (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012) differed. Last but not least, the groups of children were different in relation to number, gender patterns, ethnicity and class. Thus, many factors and dynamics varied from school to school and most of them we had no chance of predicting or preparing for. If we want to understand the complexity of contemporary children’s lives – and not just think about cause-effect, but go deeper into the complex criss-cross relations between media and social lives in

children's lives – we need to work in ways that are flexible and open for change in the processes, we initiate.

The emerging research design described in this article offers a step in this direction. Some of the ambitions of the design and some of the thoughts behind it are relevant to developers of new methodological approaches within childhood studies. Particularly: (1) the aspiration to think research designs as an iterative process, not as a fixed and inflexible manual, (2) the ambition to go beyond the traditional interview (sayings), or observations studying children's practices and discourses (sayings and doings) at a distance. We need to accept the children as agents, collaborators and participants at all levels, including an accept of their suggestions of how we should make changes in our pre-plans for the interventions, and include their video-productions in not only our dataset but also as part of our analytical results.

3 Case-Studies and Iterative Methodologies

To explore the two fields of practices, competences and possibly intersections: cooking and media, we choose to have multiple cases, because case studies are suitable for an empirical enquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g. a 'case'), set within its real world context – especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2011, p. 4). Case studies are especially relevant when you want to “analyze complex social interactions, to uncover ‘inseparable’ factors that are elements of the phenomena” (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007, p. 84).

The complexity and embeddedness of social interactions was exactly what we wanted to explore. We did not expect to be able to explain the causes and effects of the relations between cooking and media competences and the social relations in the classroom, but we hoped to be able to uncover essential ‘inseparable’ factors in the field. In our pre-understanding (Gadamer, 2007) two inseparable factors were likely to be cooking skills and media information competencies or even more general media literacies (Drotner & Erstad, 2014; Drotner & Kobbemagel, 2014; Livingstone, 2010). We hoped to produce data that allowed for an ‘extendability’, but not necessarily for generalisations as more quantitative studies would allow us (VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2013).

Our three qualitative cases of interventions were chosen among several contacts for maximum diversity (Yin, 2011): one urban, one suburban and one city school each with their specific didactic profile. Which means that we are not able to compare the cases one to one. As already mentioned, taste and

cooking was our common point of departure. One of the media researchers had done a pilot study among boys aged 12–14, confirming that they were fond of food television, and especially liked the format *Masterchef* in the American and Australian versions and the Danish junior version with children aged between 11–15. Furthermore, in 2016, *Den store Bagedyst*, a BBC-format, had huge ratings among Danish girls and women from 11 and upwards. An interest in cooking and competition – at least as television entertainment – seemed to exist in the age group. Therefore, we decided to borrow elements from the two formats and present the children for a ‘reality’ cooking-competition in school. We hoped they would find it funny to mimic the television-formats and be able to ‘play’ together with us in a kind of recognised scenario (Schön, 1983). We established competing groups, each consisting of boys and girls working together, because gender issues might be at stake here in relation to cooking as well as in relation to the knowledge of the television-formats. We knew that DIY videos on YouTube were popular in the age group, so we encouraged the groups of children to make their own cooking video on tablets with software they already knew how to use. This was our basic idea, which we tried in the first – rural – school. But we did not know if the children wanted to participate and what would happen in class. We were open for change and surprises.

We will use the term iterative research design for our procedure. Iterative means repetitive or repeated processes. Iterative design is a term originally used for societal planning design that experienced a crisis in the 1960s’ open societal systems, where problems were not that easily to find or define. One had to understand the field extensively to know if a problem or a complex of problems exist (Rittel & Webber, 1973, pp. 160–161). Therefore, repeated investigations alike and not so alike were made, involving citizens that often were not satisfied with traditional linear, effective planning initiatives as co-creators. In our case, we were not problem-oriented, but we wanted to explore in some depth, what is going on between the two fields cooking and media use in a school-context. If we could understand some of the relations between cooking and media use and between accepted competences in school and in leisure – gendered or not – we would be able to argue for how to incorporate cooking and eating in school in new ways, and for how to make the media competences acquired in leisure and home fruitful in a school context and vice versa. We knew that each case is essentially unique and that its particularity might be bigger than its commonalities with other cases (*ibid.*, pp. 164–165). Which means that we had to repeat the interventions, as if we never did it before and accept the changes and challenges posed by the particular pupils and teachers in the particular school. Iterative research design thus is by nature nonlinear and often progresses in circles or spirals: it is an exploratory process that is

repeated over and over again (Brown, 2009, IDEO). Pragmatically, we choose to have only three cases of home economic classes.

Similar procedures are also called co-design (Pedersen, 2015). It has been developed in relation to design of ITK hardware, computer programs and software when it comes to develop problem based digital software (Pedersen, 2015). The basic idea is an open and co-creative research design, as for instance a scenario that encourages collaborative work practices and user-centered approaches like our interventions before the design of a prototype. To start over and over again as many times as you can afford in a collaborative and participatory process until you have a joint idea of a design that can explain or solve a problem (Brandt & Messeter, 2004). Our product is not a design object but a prototype of research design.

We repeated the intervention three times, but we could have done it many more times in many more schools. We used the same fundamentals: (1) introduction of the intervention to the class, we showed a funny food video as an example. (2) Cooking of food items, that we brought to the school. Parallel to this the groups and the researchers filmed. The researchers participated, observed and interviewed. (3) A board of judges tasted the food and a winner was elected. (4) Eating, taste discussions and a break. (5) The films were edited in iMovie. (6) A film-festival with the participating children as judges gave a prize to the best film. (7) Brief evaluation with the teacher and in the research group.

We were open for changes in all three interventions, but some of the changes surprised us. We invited the children in the classroom as co-designers and co-producers of our three cases and the qualitative data set. But in the second intervention we decided to ask the teacher not to involve herself as much as she would have liked to. So, we actually excluded her as co-designer. None of the teachers took part in cooking or in filming, so they also excluded themselves. The collaborative process thus was performed between the children and the four researchers that were present. We did not reflect upon the role of the teachers in the process, but if we do the interaction a fourth time, the role of the teacher, as co-producer would need to be in more focus. We would try to invite the teacher as a co-producer on par with the children and with the researchers. We do not know what would happen. But it is a good example on how to work iteratively: to repeat but to change focus in the repetition, because we found a blind spot – or a problem behind the problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973, pp. 158–160).

The research-group was stable in all interventions. We had worked together before, but we are trained in different qualitative methods and have different research strengths even though all of us for years have published on children

and adolescents in school or institutional contexts. It surprised us, how much our divergences in methods mattered. All of us were present during all interventions. The anthropologist took the lead in taking field notes. But after the first intervention, it was obvious, that the notes, photos, videos and interviews we had made were very diverse. The ethnographer looked at cooking skills, the media researchers listened for references to media formats, genres and technologies. The cultural studies person looked for boys doing masculinity. For the second intervention, we therefore planned to have each our focus: media uses, gender-roles and hand skills. This also resulted in very diverse observations and we were not able to keep our foci, because the children acted differently, the teacher was more dominant – but also because the children in the second, suburban school had previously had researchers in the classroom. They invited us into their reflections and doings and asked us questions, that explicitly made us part of joint productions in the classroom. In the third, private school the classroom was small and crowded. Most of the children here felt on par with us and participated in the collaboration as equals – or even as superiors. They invited us to participate with them and took the lead, especially when it came to tasting and cooking skills, demonstrating high competences, broad knowledge of international chefs and high self-esteem. The teacher was passive, reluctant towards media use and took the role of a facilitator in the situation.

The pupils and the school context in the three interventions thus actually co-produced our research design as an iterative process. We started over again three times because the three different classes, schools and teachers acted differently and made us act differently and take ad hoc decisions about what to do. Such as to ask one teacher to take a more discrete role or to become more involved with the children than planned. Our observations were more or less participatory; the relations between the researcher and the pupils were more or less on par etc. We succeeded in getting the children to co-operate in the design process and to co-produce parts of our data, but in other ways, than we had thought originally. The role of the teachers only occurred to be a problem to us after all three interventions.

Our research roles also changed: the anthropologist began to look for media use and the media researcher began to look for how ethnicity was constructed in the classroom. The conclusion is that when you decide to have an iterative process of repeating and then changing the methodology, you must be prepared to start more or less all over again with each case, and you have to accept to have your research plans redefined and to change your own skills

as a researcher. If you work in a cross-disciplinary team, you must be ready to learn from other disciplines in the process. Thus, an iterative research design is an on-going process with an unknown end or goal. Unlike in other qualitative designs, where the ultimate idea would be to continue until nothing new is found (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011/2015), an iterative design keeps repeating the exploratory proceedings – and changing them – until the problems behind the problem may occur. In this case we had to take a pragmatically decision and stop after three interventions because of our research frame: time and money expired.

Qualitative methodology is often explained as a series of steps proceeding from one phase to another. If we take Bryman's model as an example, he suggests six steps:

1. The general research questions
2. Selection of relevant sites and subjects
3. Collection of relevant data
4. Interpretation of data
5. Conceptual and theoretical work
6. Writing up findings or conclusions

In this case, our research question was explorative: We were looking for possible relations and intersections between cooking and media use and –productions. Secondly, we were looking for intersections of competences retrieved in formal learning processes at school and informal learning in leisure and home. As a means we created real life participatory interventions to enact collaborative practices in and across the two fields: cooking and media-uses. In Bryman's model we were at step 1,2,3,4 at the same time: in search for a precise research question, we made interventions in three cases to collect data and we collaboratively in the research group started to interpret the data with the children's data-interpretation in their videos.

This is not easy to show in a model, because it is all messed up. Figures 8.1 and 8.2 are two examples of how software-designers visualize the iterative process towards developing a prototype – in this case a prototype for iterative research design methodology.¹

The second model (Figure 8.2) looks chaotic but describes our explorative methodology: we started at the same point: presenting ourselves to the class and bringing bags with food items to the schools. From this starting point, a collaborative process of research practices and cooking and media practices took over, again and again and again: iteratively. The research methodology concept/prototype is still a work in progress.

of them reflected explicitly upon it. The practices in the home economics classes gave room for the children's creativity in relation to cooking and video co-productions and most of them thought the interventions simply to be fun. They invited us to repeat the intervention.

The interventions produced demonstrated questions, that would often not have possible to ask or to answer in an ordinary interview setting, because they were actualized in the specific practices, enacted by specific children in a specific classroom in a specific school-setting. For instance, we were surprised by the complexity of the differences between the school contexts and in the social backgrounds of the children. We were surprised by cooking practices (urban school) and skills and also surprised by media skills – or the lack of them (urban school). Thus, we left the schools with insights and new questions: The intersections between cooking skills and media skills and literacies were not as simple as we had imagined. We began to think in cross-over models instead of relational models. It had been a good idea with a meeting with the class after the intervention to reflect together with the children and their teacher and to invite them to further co-analyse our joint data and discuss the different models of understanding the data with us. The next step in an iterative design-process thus would have been to start all over again at a fourth school, etc.

To sum up, we argue that we need to give space for and consider our informants, the children, as co-producers of the research design and knowledge and 2) new media offer easily accessible possibilities for innovative research designs which can give us insight into the children's social lives, their media competencies and cooking practices as a supplement to well-known methods such as interview, textual analysis and observations. Gubrium and Harper (2016) stress that participatory and collaborative research with children means, that all are involved all the way through the process as co-investigators, co-writers and co-analysers. This proved difficult to do in the strict sense, but the videos the children produced and that we analyse as part of our data are in themselves a first analyses or narratives of how the children summed up the intervention.

5 New Childhood Studies Revisited

Collaborative research with children has been done since the 1990s. James and Prout's (1990/2015) seminal anthology on *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* suggested a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood. In a Nordic context, Solberg (2015) proved important for looking at children as agents in and for their own lives and as products of historical social relations in and outside families and societal institutions such as Kindergarten and school.

Christensen and James (2008) developed the idea of participatory research with children in psychological research and pointed to important ethical dilemmas. They also stressed the importance of open-mindedness towards the diversities of childhoods, which our three school-cases confirm the relevance of. It is in this tradition our interventions have been created. We acknowledge the importance of ethics, when we work together with children, but in our case, we were interested in the joint skills and competences in the groups we formed in the class, not in the individual child. Our collaboration with the children was 'at a distance' and our ethical concerns were related to the schools, which is why we are not specific about which schools we visited. We choose not to use the real names of the children, but we have a lot of videos and photos showing their faces.

Much research has been done on children's productions such as narratives, photos, drawings, collages and scrapbooks, lego and other visual materials (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham, 2009; Krogager, 2012, 2016). In line with this research, we do not claim to tell the 'truth' about the approximate 65 children and the three schools. Any intervention is situated in a specific time and at a specific place among humans that participate in a co-production of research and data. Our cases and data are negotiated co-productions in a specific situation. We can report what happened in this specific situation among a specific group and we can understand and argue that some of the 'happenings' are 'extendable' to other situations where the same 'inseparable' factors are said or done, such as gender roles, competences and literacies. What we can conclude, however, is that experimental and iterative methodologies are of great importance when we want to explore relations and intersections between two or more fields of practices.

Our iterative design experiences are relevant for new methodological approaches within childhood studies. Particularly: (1) the aspiration to think research designs as an iterative process, not as a fixed and un-flexible manual, (2) the ambition to go beyond the traditional interview (sayings), or observations studying children's practices and discourses (sayings and doings) at a distance.

The gains of doing research this way is many. The participants collaborate in different practical processes that we can observe, get involved in and ask them about. We are in the front row to the numerous negotiations and compromises that take place as part of the practical enactment with the media (i-Pad) and the food. Hence, this collaborative and co-productive method is resourceful at many levels: it works differently than traditional interviewing and conventional observation because the participants show us their media and cooking practices whilst discussing and negotiating with their peers – and

with us as researchers. If we ask the participants questions about their 'doings' in the intervention the retrospective element is less dominant than when making interviews (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2008; Warde, 2005).

Certainly, there are challenges and pitfalls to this way of doing research too. Particularly, the lack of control and consequently also the absence of a systematic procedure that we can rely on and repeat pose a challenge. The context (and the many factors that it involves e.g. the school kitchen, the attitude and handling of tablets, the different role of the teachers etc.) is defining for what takes place during the day and that makes it difficult draw parallels between the three interventions. Also, practical matters as data storage has posed a challenge.

However, there is no turning back. Iterative research design with children offer new possibilities for researchers to see and hear children's views and experiences. In a quickly developing and complicated world, researchers must continually adjust and develop their approaches to doing research. Childhood experiences in a digital era is indeed a challenging object of study which demands an agile and creative researcher and participating children. We hope this article's methodological reflection might inspire further creativity and agility within Nordic childhood studies.

Note

- 1 See www.hci.Stanford.edu

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