Children's media culture: a key to libraries of the future?

Kirsten Drotner
DREAM: Danish Research Centre on Education and
Advanced Media Materials
University of Southern Denmark
Odense, Denmark

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Abstract

Public libraries offer key arenas of galvanising children's socio-cultural expressions and expectations of the future. A main argument of the paper is that today these expressions and expectations feed on a complex media culture, and therefore both physical and virtual libraries need to offer young users high-quality output within all semiotic modes of representation - texts, images and sounds - and high-quality input within these modes through engaged dialogues between users and professional librarians skilled in quality assessment across different modes of representation. The main argument is substantiated through a brief analysis of global trends in children's media uses and their socio-cultural divides and through examples of the challenges facing multimodal libraries.

The main argument underlying the following presentation is that public libraries of the 21st century must offer young users a wide range of new, mulitimodal forms of expression in order to fulfill their time-honoured aims and objectives.

More specifically, I shall argue that public libraries need to move away from defining themselves in relation to their holdings, their products, towards defining themselves in relation to particular functions for users. These functions are to do with facilitating quality of knowledge in relation to information, entertainment and communication.

In many countries, public libraries are some of the oldest institutions to resource children's acquistion and articulation of semiotic modes of expression that may galvanise users' socio-cultural expressions and expectations of the future. Traditionally, print has been a main mode of expression offering a rich repertoire of genres across information (fact) and entertainment (fiction).

As repositories of print, public libraries have been important catalysts of safeguarding children's freedom of expression, as expressed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989. Thus, article 13 states that:

The child shall have the right to freedom expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (*Convention* 1989: article 13).

Importantly, the article specifies that children's freedom of expression encompasses reception (seek, receive) as well as production and exchange (impart), information as well as entertainment (ideas of all kinds) and the use of all media. While public libraries have traditionally focused on facilitating children's modes of reception and to do so through print media, current trends in media technologies and media culture offer important new ways of widening this focus to cover other aspects of children's freedom of expression to do with their shaping and sharing information and entertainment across semiotic repertoires of text, images and sound.

A key question, of course, is whether or not libraries should embark upon such a route of development, and, if so, for what reasons and with which implications. In the following, I shall attempt to outline some answers and to do so by situating my discussion through a brief analysis of global trends in children's media uses and the challenges these trends pose for library development.

Media moves: convergence, commodification, globalisation

In many parts of the world, media are constitutive of children's everyday routines, their formation of social networks and their outlook on the world. For example, 40 per cent of Danish children aged 9-16 have media and ICTs as pretexts for meeting with their friends – the boys playing computer games, the girls often watching films together or listening to music; and these results resonate with trends in many European countries (Drotner, 2001: 164; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001). Watching television, playing computer games or exchanging personal updates on social networking sites such as FaceBook or Twitter are not additions to children's social lives, but are activities patterning the fabric of their everyday lives. Three related trends mark their uses, namely a technical convergence of all semiotic signs; economic commodification of products; and globalised processes of social participation.

We are currently witnessing a gradual merging of our television sets and radios, our print media, mobile phones, computers and the internet. This convergence between media, telecommunication and ICTs is enabled by the technological possibilities of digitizing all signs - text, sound, numbers, live and still images – and combining all of these signs through the computer. Some technologies are digital from their inception, such as the personal computer, games consoles and mobile devices; other technologies take on digital forms, such as digital television, e-books and radio podcasts. Over the last two decades, technological media convergence has been accompanied by financial convergence in the form of transborder mergers and acquisitions between large news corporations, internet providers, broadcasters and entertainment industries.

The complex constellation of current media are mostly developed by commercial enterprises and driven by logics of the market. While broadcast media such as radio

and television share a past divided between commercial and public-service aims and often defined in relation to the nation state, computer gaming, online and mobile forms of communication are virtually all are all commerical products whose survival is largely dependent upon their success on globalised markets; and current clashes over ownership to online content (intellectual property rights versus creative commons) are clear demonstrations of the enormous financial investments made in media industries.

Taken together, convergence and commodification serve to blur existing boundaries between what is often named new and old media. Thus, ICTs, or new media, no longer develop in isolation from old media such as television, newspapers or radio. Moreover, the rapid domestication of these technologies in many parts of the world serve to shift people's interest from the new gadgets themselves onto their function, and this is particularly true of children. For example, they rarely want a new mobile phone because of a more advanced technology, but because they want to communicate in new ways, at different times and locales (Drotner, 2005; Ling, 2004).

In tandem with convergence, the last two decades have seen an intensified globalization of media and ICT production, distribution, formats and applications. It is commonly agreed that today media are constitutive of cultural globalization: the accelerated global flows of signs and cultural commodities by communication technologies serve to increase what John Tomlinson calls "complex connectivity" (Tomlinson, 1999: 2) – that is global, or transnational, media accentuate the interconnectedness of distinct cultures and modes of existence.

So far, a top-down perspective on globalization has prevailed, a perspective that focuses upon the economic, technological, political and legal aspects of this complex connectivity. Studying children's uses of media, genres and formats that traverse geographical and temporal boundaries is one way of approaching media globalization from a bottom-up perspective. Such a perspective may serve to substantiate and nuance the often very generalised top-down theories about cultural globalization, theories that also tend to be formulated as dichotomies between national and transnational (i.e. US) culture; between homogenisation and heterogenization.

User trends: handling multimodalities, digital divides and otherness

The structural trends towards media digitization, commodification and globalisation have important, and conflictual, implications for children's socio-cultural existence and development. These implications are to do with shaping and sharing of multimodal resources; with cultures of participation and the formation of digital divides; and with handling semiotic and social forms of otherness.

Digital media facilitate children's cultural forms of production and exchange. Digitization of all semiotic signs affords more seamless interweaving of text, images and sounds into multimodal mixtures that may be manipulated and exchanged. It should be noted that multimodality *per se* is not particular to digital media. Even the earliest books for children display a mixture of text and images, so the novelty of digital media is rather the ease with which different sign systems may be brought on to the same platform and manipulated there. Moreover, this manipulation of signs is also well-known from other media – writing letters or modifying photo negatives through special forms of development. Again, it is the relative ease with which such manipulations may be carried out that is particular to digital media – most children

with access to a computer attempt to download music, images and text, and many edit and remix these signs in order to upload and share the results (Gilje 2008, Perkel 2008) – and this immediacy is unknown to analogue media apart from the telephone.

These processes involve often complex handlings of a range of semiotic codes and conventions. Several studies demonstrate that it takes a good deal of training to shape the complexity of semiotic resources in ways that are relevant not only to the young producers but also to the ones to which the results are addressed (Jewitt & Kress 2003, Tyner 1998). Very few children exert any form of digital literacy or multimodal literacy without systematic training.

Today, children's leisure cultures, not school, are the primary training grounds for what Henry Jenkins terms a "participatory culture" of digital media marked by online affiliations, creative expressions, collaborative problem-solving and mediated circulations (Jenkins et al. 2006). But, importantly, this culture operates on different forms of membership. Digital media are virtually all of a commercial nature, as we noted, and children's access to and appropriation of current media culture is unevenly distributed in terms of region, class, gender and ethnicity. These socalled digital divides demonstrate an intimate connection to familiar fault lines in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age and region (Fox 2005, Peter & Valkenburg 2006). Digital divides are often tackled by policy makers and educational stakeholders as problems of access, while their most drastic implications are possibly to do with inequalities of use – of children having very pronounced differences in terms of learning and knowing how to handle the complexities of media in ways that are relevant to their current lives and future situation (Warschauer 2004).

Divides in terms of cultural preferences and uses are a mainstay of modern childhood, and as such digital divides are no cause for analytical concern. But they should be cause for concern in terms of socio-cultural policies. This is because digital divides are increasingly being perceived as social divides. Widespread, global discourse that we live in information societies, knowledge societies, learning societies or network societies (Castells 1996, Hutchins 1968, Husén 1974, Ransom 1994, Stehr 1994) all point to the formative role played by the storage, formation, processing and increasingly mediatized communication of signs. A key competence is therefore semiotic competence, that is the ability to give shape to and handle multimodal expressions as part of everyday collaboration, communication and participation.

Children's mediatized leisure-time cultures offer important training grounds for the formation of multimodal semiotic resources. Uneven access to and appropriation of these resources therefore galvanise social inequalities to a degree not seen in previous generations whose life chances have been less dependent on semiotic competences. From this perspective, the choices made by public libraries in terms of their future resourcing of children attain new dimension of relevance as we shall see below.

Irrespective of their actual options of engaging with different media and genres, children around the world know about their existence. This is because media globalisation both affords and enforces constant encounters with different representations of existence, different modes of communication and engagement, different ways of "being in the world". Children react to such mediatized forms of otherness with rejection, evasion, immersion or scepticism, but few are unaffected (Block & Buckingham 2007, Feilitzen & Carlsson 2002).

In empirical terms, then, there are no grounds for celebratory definitions of the rising generation through their unified media uses as is seen in both popular and academic

discourses that variously term children a net generation (Tapscott, 1998)**,** a digital generation (Papert, 1996), cyberkids (Holloway and Valentine, 2003) and the thumb tribes (Rheingold, 2002). Children are differently affected by current media trends and they react on these trends according to differences in terms of age, gender, region and ethnicity. Yet, they all face a present and a future marked by their abilities to engage with and handle these increasingly digitized, commodified and globalised media. There are important questions, here, about how public libraries position themselves as resources for children in handling these complexities.

Changes in library output: new materials, new uses

The changing nature of children's media uses impact on the ways in which public libraries operate in parts of the world maked by saturation of media access. For example, in Denmark the number of children visiting public libraries at least once a month has decreased from 51% in 1998 to 39% in 2004, while the number of children visiting less than once a month has risen from 28% in 1987 to 43% in 2004 (Bille et al., 2005: 183). Visits to school libraries have remained at a stable high percentage: 91% of children visit at least once a month against 93% in 1998 (Bille et al., 2005: 182), perhaps because school libraries' operate as resources for explicit learning processes rather than as individual leisure-time options as is the case for public libraries.

Developed on a notion of cultural scarcity of access, many public libraries still focus on facilitating children's physical access to print materials. Naturally, this focus is important as a prerequisite of use in parts of the world where cultural scarcity is an issue, and to groups of users to whom access is difficult. In Denmark, as in many other countries, libraries vie for children's attention in competition with other cultural arenas; and so here the challenge is not so much to offer access as to offer diversity of quality materials and diversity of uses.

Public libraries need to widen their output of materials to include all modes of represenation - print, sound, still and moving images - and, in fact, this has been a requirement of public libraries in Denmark since 2000. Today, Danish children make less use of the library for book loans while they demonstrate a keen interest in lending film and music, just as online gaming is a popular pastime in the physical library, particularly for boys aged 10-13 (Drotner, Jørgensen & Nyboe 2006). Children diversify their library uses into physical and virtual uses in a process of transformation that has been termed the hybird library (Thorhauge 2001), (Thorhauge, 2001), the performative library (Graulund, 2006) and the library as a third space between private and public places (Oldenburg, 1999).

Public libraries are still key catalysts for children's freedom of expression. But their role is shifting from safeguarding access to information and entertainment on to facilitating young users' transformation of abundant and often chaotic bits of information into coherent knowledge that facilite their sense-making processes. In terms of entertainment, a major challenge is to offer what children would not easily encounter in visits to the local mall or surfing the internet. Very importantly, connections made across various modes of expression are hard for children to acquire, for example in recognition of genre similaries or thematic parallels. Since such connections help animate young users' sense of aesthetic quality and contextual

awareness, they are important aspects in fulfilling the aims set in the UN Convention of securing cultural quality and diversity.

Related to the increased importance played by appropriations rather than access is the diversification of quality control. Library professionals are no longer gatekeepers of cultural quality through their choice of materials offered in the physical library. Children can, and do, order materials online, they snap up bits of information and interesting stories from a range of sources; and so the mere presence of materials in the physical library is little guide in children's cultural choices. The changing nature of cultural access and quality control both enforce and allow new relations to be formed between young users and library professionals.

Changes in input: New professional skills

As most other public-service institutions, libraries have based their modes of communication with the public on what may be termed a sender perspective, i.e. a perspective fucusing on institutional priorities of dissemination. Faced by increasing competition not least from commercial providers of cultural output, many public libraries have sought to attune themselves more to a user perspective, sensitising themselves to different user groups and their immediate cultural preferences. While this shift of perspective have operated as an important eye-opener for many libraries in terms of priorities of leadership and more contextual understanding of users, it has also implied a more consumer-oriented view on users, in the sense that users tend to be defined through their concrete choice of materials.

If public libraries are to remain resources for children's freedom of expresssion under the changed conditions outlined above, one of their major challenges is to develop more holistic strategies of communication with users. Such strategies must be sensitive to children's everyday lives and their diversified contexts of cultural appropriation; they must demonstrate abilities of quality assessment across a range of cultural expressions; and they must be able to juggle the different demands of the virtual and physical libraries.

Realising such strategies is no small feat. There are important questions to be asked about professional education of the future, of changing demands made on physical library places, and last, but not least, of professional communication skills. In a Danish context, a recent white paper on the future of libraries for children outlines some answers to these questions based on in-depth analysis on children's cultures in general and their library uses in particular (Brandt & Poulsen 2008). By way of conclusion, I would like to comment on the changing demands made on professional communication skills. This aspect is perhaps of particular relevance in communicating with children brought up with demands on individual distinction and attainment. A dialogic approach has proved to work well under these cicumstances, an approach that balances respect for age and gender differences while insisting on professional insights and expertise (Drotner, Jørgensen & Nyboe 2006). Key catalysts for the formation of such a dialogic approach are joint spaces of professional reflection, i.e. joint reflections on practice in practice conducted in close proximity to institutional routines, yet with room for ruptures of these routines though a shifting of perspective.

Conferences are primary venues facilitating such change of perspectives. The theme of this year's IFLA conference, Libraries create futures: building on cultural heritage,

offers a prime means of encountering others and exchanging perspectives; and the title of this session holds a particular promise of forming joint visions.

Thank your for your time and attention.

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