Understanding Childrens and Young Adolescents Media Practices: Reflections on Methodology

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English abstract

The article ‘Understanding children’s and young adolescents’ media practices: reflections on methodology’ is intended to contribute to current discussions on the perception and construction of child/childhood and the surrounding digital media landscape. In the article, the researcher describes and reflects upon her own experiences with various methods (interviews, diaries, drawings and photos) used when examining children’s and young adolescents’ (in the age range 8-16 years) media practices, focusing on the Internet and computer games. Throughout the text, the claim of having young people’s perspectives as the main point of departure in research is looked at with a critical eye. This key issue is elaborated upon, through examples from research, by discussing three main interrelated aspects - the conditions for young people to have a say in research, ethical aspects and the type of data acquired when the researcher claims to have a children’s or youth perspective.

Keywords: Methodological reflection, children and youth, media studies, participation perspective, digital media.
Children’s perspectives in a digital media landscape

This article is intended to contribute to current discussions on the perception and construction of child/childhood and the surrounding digital media landscape. In media research, as in many other academic disciplines, the need to conduct research from a children’s perspective, in which children and young people are to be perceived as competent co-actors, is being stressed increasingly. At the same time, young people’s media culture is facing several changes, such as media convergence, intertextuality and merchandising (Tingstad, 2006), which in turn have consequences for audience research – what questions to examine and how to study them. In media (audience) studies today, the thought of the participating and competent child is reflected in its more child-centred, constructivist approach (Livingstone, 1998: 441). This approach stresses the need to examine the media, and the meanings attached to them, on the basis of the young user’s experiences and how a specific media use must always be put in a specific context, i.e. the daily life of the child. This child-centred approach to media research can be correlated with more general discourses on child and childhood that have taken place in Western society and with what has come to be called “sociology of childhood”, where the perception of children as “human beings” rather than “human becomings” is brought to the fore (e.g. James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Recently, however, this sociological shift in childhood studies has been questioned increasingly, owing to its dichotomous way of thinking; it fails to look at children and adults in non-dualistic ways, to see them as “beings” as well as “becomings” depending on the situation at hand. In today’s late-modern society, for example, an adult’s life may follow continuously changing paths with regard to family, work, and education (see further Prout, 2005:66). Buckingham (2000) also makes us aware of the risks of exclusively treating the young person as competent in mediated and commercial contexts, thus reminding us not to perceive children and young people as a homogenous group and that various competences are learned gradually. Relating to the above-mentioned issues, we may ask what is actually meant by a children’s perspective and what methods media researchers have at their disposal to grasp the complexity of today’s media landscape? I find these two questions highly important and will therefore describe and reflect upon my own experiences with various methods (i.e., interviews, diaries, drawings and photos) when examining children’s and young adolescents’ (in the age range 8-16) media practices, here focusing on the Internet and computer games. While conducting research, I have always tried to use young people’s perspectives as my main point of departure, but over the years I have asked myself increasingly what is actually meant by this claim. This key issue will be looked into further by discussing, through examples from my research, three main interrelated aspects – the conditions for young people to have a say in research, ethical aspects and the type of data acquired when the researcher claims to have a children’s perspective.

Thus, a crucial question to ask is whether it is at all possible to achieve an “insider” perspective and grasp children’s worlds through their own eyes. Isn’t every research situation always embedded in, for instance, various power relations, where it is the researcher who defines the conditions of the research and formulates the research questions? And isn’t the power issue even more evident when dealing with children (Eder & Fingerson, 2002)? If we admit that various relations and contexts guide research, what then does a children’s perspective mean? Hake (1999) discusses these issues and the challenges that face researchers working with younger children. According to Hake, a children’s perspective concerns acquiring knowledge about how we think children perceive the world, which in turn has implications for the type of research questions we ask and the methods we choose. This means that we, as researchers, should study issues and raise questions that are of importance to children. Furthermore, in the section heading, “perspectives” is used rather than the singular ”perspective”, as the latter tends to make us think of children as a homogenous group, which
entails the risk of essentializing and generalizing. This standpoint has also implications for what methods will be used in a study. A given method may not be valuable and fruitful for all children involved in the research in a way to express their opinions and experiences. Looking at younger children, Clark and Moss (2001) talk about the Mosaic approach, where visual and verbal methods are used to give participants the option of expressing themselves in various symbolic ways. One crucial issue that may arise, which applies to all studies presented in the article, is when data from different methods vary or when data collected using the same method is contradictory. What does this mean? Are certain data then given priority? The answer given depends on the ontological view of the researcher. Is the collected data to be seen as a pure reflection of reality? If so, then the issue raised above is indeed problematic. But by perceiving data as constructed, as in the presented studies, through various forms of interactions and contexts, the researcher turns his or her attention to these forms in order to explain the collected material.

Thus, a multi-method approach can be discerned in my own research with children and youth, where my aim has been to gain an understanding of their media use in daily life, which is discussed in more detail below. But before doing that, the following section takes a brief look at the general theoretical point of departure of my research – an everyday life perspective, featured by an abductive approach, which, as will be seen, has had implications for the specific research questions raised and how I have chosen to work with children and young adolescents.

Everyday life as a point of departure: an abductive approach

An “everyday life” perspective is a central point of departure in the presented research. The media are seen as social and cultural products of importance to people’s daily life, for example in the formation of culture and identity. From previously being interested in a specific medium and its effects, media studies today emphasize the need to take into account various contexts and the notion that the individual creates meanings based on his or her own personal and cultural references. Cultural studies (with its many different sub-genres) has become a label for researchers who advocate an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, and media use is seen as the product of the specific socio-cultural context in which it is given a particular meaning (for a more detailed description of cultural studies, see Bjurström, Fornäs & Ganetz, 2000: 119-141). The context of media use, both theoretically and methodologically, is of great relevance within cultural studies, making us aware that different patterns of media use may evolve in different contexts. Thus, media use and the encounter with a text do not take place in a vacuum, but are rather the result of a process of negotiation between mediated and real elements of young people’s everyday life. The examples in the article at hand illustrate how this process can be studied among children and youth in today’s digital media landscape.

In my work, I apply an abductive approach, meaning that I constantly alternate between theoretical perspectives and concepts, on one hand, and empirical data, on the other. The abduction approach is defined by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000:17) as “A general look through the broad outlines of the theoretical and empirical research field, followed as quickly as possible by a leap into one’s own empirical material”. So-called sensitizing concepts have been used in the preparation of the fieldwork. Patton (1990: 216) defines these concepts as a way to “[…] provide a basic framework highlighting the importance of certain kinds of events, activities, and behaviors”. As a researcher, I have had certain research questions, theoretical perspectives and previous empirical experiences in mind before entering the field, but at the same time I have tried to approach the field with “openness” to new ways of looking at things with the help of my young informants. The researcher never
approaches reality as a tabula rasa; he or she always has preconceptions and theoretical assumptions about things, people, etc., which in turn affect the relation between the researcher’s “text” and reality.

Let us now look more closely at some examples from my research. The following text is organized in relation to the three following themes (taken from three different studies): drawing and talking about the game of one’s dreams, writing and talking about a diary, taking photos of and talking about one’s homeland. Within each theme, the above-mentioned interrelated issues of how to establish conditions that allow young people to have a say in research, ethical aspects and the type of data acquired when researchers claim to have a children’s perspective are brought to the fore.

Drawing and talking about the game of one’s dreams

It is my experience that children enjoy talking about media, they know the topic well, and when an adult is interested in their, for example, use of computer games, they are even more inclined to participate in research. In one of my studies, 42 children (ages 8/9 and 12/13) were interviewed about their use of computer games and asked to draw the game of their dreams (see further Sjöberg, 2002).

When presenting a study to young participants, several ethical issues are raised (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Sjöberg, 2007b). Informed consent means that all participants (including children’s parents), irrespective of age, must be informed about and understand the purpose of the study, what their role in the project is and how the collected data will be used and presented. But how do we actually explain to a child (or an adult for that matter) what it actually means to take part in a study, to be interviewed, to make a drawing, etc.? In my work, I try to make the study at hand as concrete as possible by drawing parallels to children’s own projects in school, letting them ask me questions about what a researcher does and asking them about their images of scientists.

As my specific study on computer games, I had certain questions in mind before conducting the interviews, but I tried to keep an open mind and let the children discuss issues related to computer games they found interesting and enjoyed talking about. Group interviews were chosen for the present study, as I wanted to gain various perspectives on computer games, but also to see how the informants talked about games among themselves. According to Eder and Fingerson (2002), the researcher’s power can be reduced if children are interviewed in groups. But what one forgets in this discussion is the various power relations existing in, for example, a peer group or within a family. In relation to the discussion on power, Hake (1999) asserts that when an adult interviews a child (whether in a group or individually), the child often feels he or she is dealing with an authority figure. In my study on computer games, the focus was on only one medium, and because playing computer games is usually a peer activity and a topic of conversation among peers, the group interview method seemed appropriate. The group interviews and the drawing sessions were conducted in the school, and because previous studies have shown gender differences in the use of computer games, girls and boys were interviewed separately. Conducting interviews in schools may give informants the impression that the researcher is looking for correct answers, and the interviewer may be viewed as a teacher (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). While this might be the case, one can also argue that children are familiar with discussions and being asked questions in a school context, which may facilitate the interview. The fact that all the participating children in the study played computer games and had a great interest in this activity encouraged a dynamic atmosphere, where the children’s discussions were largely with each other rather than with the interviewer. While group interviews may be criticized for involving group pressure, where certain persons adjust their answers to what
they think the group norm is or are afraid of reprisals (Merton et al., 1990), the present interviews on computer games revealed several examples of children sharing secrets with each other and talking about things they might not mention to people outside the interview situation. We should also consider whether group pressure always has a negative impact; it may, for instance, reveal underlying norms and values that are of importance to understanding a given issue.

Looking specifically at the study on computer games, following the group interview, each participant was given a blank piece of paper and asked to draw the game of one’s dreams. By having a concrete drawing in front of them that they had created, the children could (individually) tell in more detail what type of content a good game should contain; it became a visual means through which the child explained symbols, figures, etc., their meanings and importance, providing me with valuable knowledge about children’s relations to computer games. When using any visual method in research, it is important to let the “producer” talk about his or her drawing or, for example, photo (see later heading on taking photos), as the verbal story attached to the drawing is part of the meaning making process. The content, and its meaning, is constructed and re-constructed through story-telling (Änggård, 2006). To illustrate this claim, a drawing is presented below, which was made by 8-year-old Agnes. Looking at the drawing, which Agnes called “Josefin in trouble” (“Josefin blir i bråk”) (see figure 1), one would never imagine this was a war game, and it is impossible for a spectator to understand how the different components of the drawing are related. In Agnes’ talk about her game, it is also obvious that there are things in the game that have not been drawn, but for Agnes these things are evident and play a crucial role in the game.

Children often write their name on a drawing; it is a sign of ownership and of being proud of the drawing’s content. Whether or not the researcher should publish the signature is an ethical issue, and even if a child has given her or his consent to do so, the researcher must make the final decision, especially if sensitive issues such as abuse and bullying are involved.
After just having seen Agnes’ drawing, it might be interesting to hear her story about this specific game and drawing:

- It’s a fun game.
  
  What’s in the game, what do you do?
- You’re supposed to try to capture these fake guys that are small, like that one.
  
  How do you capture them?
- Well you go into a store so you can buy these guns like bows so when you shoot them you get their lives and then if you’re there and a car comes along then well maybe two have got away then you die. And then maybe there’s a waterfall and that’s good because then you can ride a little, then you bathe and swim and you can get lives there, and money and all.
  
  But what’s this, a high jump?
- That’s him, she’s supposed to, to try to make him jump on the wrong path.
  
  And these two with skateboards?
- She’s a witch who makes people feel good and stuff, a special witch.

While an adult may interpret the drawing and the story attached to it as confusing – having difficulties seeing how the verbal and visual expressions of the games are related – the idea behind the game is clear to Agnes. Within poststructuralist theory, the issue of whether structure has a singular centre or is open and dynamic in nature is highly debated (Fornäs, 1995), and this question comes to the fore in Agnes’ drawing of her computer game. The game is circular in the sense that even if the player is told to start at “click here” (“klik här” in the drawing), the paths the game takes are unpredictable. By only reading Agnes’ explanation of her game, one gets the impression that it is the hunting and shooting of fake guys (falska gubbar) that predominate, though not a single bow is seen in the drawing. Instead the drawing contains a broken heart, a witch, etc. After shooting fake guys, being hunted by a car, Agnes talked about a waterfall and then suddenly the player swims.
This variation of mixed elements was a common feature among the girls in the study, but was not found in the boys’ drawings, which were more realistic in nature. In her drawing, Agnes has also written *Donald Duck* (Kalle Anka). Even if she did not mention why she had written *Donald Duck* when describing the story of the game, it is an example of how children’s games sometimes refer to other media figures or are influenced by already existing games and how they relate their drawing to the wider popular culture.

The transcription process

Before looking more closely at the use of diaries in the next section, the issue of transcribing interview material requires our attention, and this applies to all three of the presented studies in which interviews have been used. Although I have not conducted any conversation analyses, in my research I have always transcribed the interview material verbatim. It is a crucial phase in the analysis process – a means of becoming familiar with the collected material, and of discovering interesting themes and paths for subsequent analyses. How the researcher chooses to transcribe and present the voice of the child is of course related to the specific meaning associated with a child’s perspective (Halldén, 2003). Looking specifically at research with children, Ochs (1999) raises crucial questions in relation to the transcription process e.g. the difficulties in integrating verbal and nonverbal behaviour in a transcript where the latter, especially among younger children, is of great importance in order to grasp a child’s intentions. Furthermore, a transcript usually has top-to-bottom bias as it relies on a linear way of thinking where an utterance being made after other utterances is interpreted by the reader as occurring later in time. A way of transcribing, that according to Ochs (1999: 170) “[…] is thus far more appropriate to adult western speech than to the speech of language-acquiring children”. And thereby limits the possibility of having a child’s perspective in the transcription process. Furthermore, translating interview excerpts from one language to another (like in this article from Swedish to English) gives the material an additional level of meanings (Ehn & Löfgren, 1996). Thus, a transcribed material is never a pure reflection of the conducted interview. We will always have the problem of converting spoken statements to writing (which in turn involves other codes of interpretation compared to speech) and of taking a certain text out of its interview context. Above-mentioned aspects all stress the necessity for the researcher to reflect upon one’s chosen methodology of transcription. In my work, the original form of the excerpts is presented, thus no changes in the children’s or young adolescents’ ways of expressing themselves (i.e. as expressed in writing) have been made. But to understand the specific meanings attached to an utterance the reader (and of course the researcher) might need knowledge about children’s cognitive, linguistic and social skills (cf. Ochs, 1999). In addition, it is still the researcher who makes the choice of presenting one excerpt and not another even if it is presented in its original form. What parts of the interview are shown and why? The issue of selection must be discussed in any study and concerns all types of data, not only interviews. As a reader, one might also ask in what (theoretical) context a certain excerpt is placed and why. What analytical claim is being presented through a specific excerpt? Questioning the selection of excerpts or examples does not mean that they should not be used but the choices made must be reflected upon by the researcher. Thus, how the presented data as well as the transcript are constructed can make the claim of having a children’s perspective problematic.

Writing and talking about a diary

The second study I like to present has a broader perspective compared to the above study on computer games. The aim of the study at hand was to examine how media practices are intertwined in everyday life. Searching for a methodological approach that could grasp these issues, the diary
The method turned out to be useful (Sjöberg, 2000, 2002a). In the following section, I will describe how a diary can provide insights into how children (12/13 years old) structure their lives in terms of time, place, activities and media use. In my research, the diary method has never been used on its own, but rather in combination with interviews and observations of a specific kind of media usage.

The outline of the diary was rather simple, with only the time of day presented. Diary entries were made for a week, and I met with the children the first time in a group (in total 12), where they were introduced to the study and the use of diaries. I also told them that the diary should be seen as a task-based activity to be carried out before I would meet them individually at home. The diary had a few guidelines, asking the youngsters to be attentive to the type of media used, its content, with whom they used media, but also to their daily activities. There is, of course, a wide range of diaries to choose from, and the diary I selected is just one example. In previous work (Sjöberg, 2000; 2002a), I have discussed problems that might arise when using diaries in research with children. Keeping a diary is demanding, and asking people to do so for a longer period of time may make them less inclined to take part in the research. Even if it is difficult for the researcher to make sure that diary entries are made on a regular basis, preferably each evening, this regularity is rather important if the diary is to cover the main daily activities. If entries are not made on a daily basis, many things may be forgotten. Furthermore, keeping a diary requires that the participant be able express him- or herself in words, which may not always be easy for everyone. Looking back at the study, I would have done things differently – letting the young participants themselves choose their own means of expression. Had I done so, it would have been the young people who chose the type of diary method rather than the researcher, and they would have had only the common guidelines of the task in mind. If we were to ask young people to use their own methodological skills, perhaps we would see the emergence of new approaches better suited to children and youth and reflecting their perspectives on a specific matter. The development of mobile phones and digital technology offers new possibilities for conducting research. For instance, participants who wished could have taken photos of their activities instead of writing them down or, if the study was conducted today, one might consider current generation of digital media like Facebook, Youtube and personal blogs as possible forums for expressing a week of a young person’s life.

Figure 2 presents a week in the life of Daniel based on his diary entries. The figure summarizes his main activities, including media use, which took place both inside and outside the home. Thus, any activities in school were excluded. This way of presenting a diary may allow the participant to avoid giving too much information, as details in a diary may disclose his or her identity and private thoughts. However, the type of presentation and its specific content were predetermined by the researcher. It was, for example, me who decided the type of activities to be labelled in the presentation based on the diary without stating anything about the meanings attached to that event by Daniel himself. And once again, in hindsight, I wish I would have experimented more and let the young participants themselves have a say in their presentations. Would the results have been different from those displayed in figure 2?
But even if individualized presentations would have been different, the one above gives the reader a good overview of what a week of media use could look like and in relation to day-to-day activities. Moreover, by employing the same type of presentation across participants, it is easier to compare diaries and discern categories that reflect, for instance, differences in media use and daily activities. In my research, I have always discussed with the informant the content of his or her diary, what is actually stated and why. This also gives me, the researcher, an opportunity to ask the participant how he or she experienced the task of keeping a diary, when the diary entries were made, etc. This is an ethical aspect that I think is usually forgotten in research.

Looking specifically at the Internet, Daniel talked about how he used it for chatting, sending email messages and playing games. His great interest in athletics was reflected in his Internet use; he searched for information about certain clubs and wanted to keep up-to-date on certain athletic events. While discussing his Internet usage based on what he had written in his diary, we sat in front of his computer where Daniel showed me his favourite sites. This allowed me not only to talk to him about his use of the Net, but also to observe the actual media content and get a better understanding of it. Observing media usage with the young is becoming increasingly important in today’s digital media landscape, where it is impossible for researchers to keep track of everything taking place on the Internet.

The last two projects to be described here look at how photos, in particular, can be a helpful tool in research with children and young adolescents. In these two projects, I have worked with observations, individual interviews and disposable cameras to learn more about young people’s thoughts on identity, culture and the role of media as a link between the homeland and the new country.

Taking photos of and talking about one’s homeland

The material in this section is based on two media ethnographic projects: Media practices in the new country (e.g. Rydin & Sjöberg, 2008) and Mediated childhoods in multicultural families in Greece (Sjöberg, 2007a, 2009). Both studies aimed at illuminating the media situation in families (with
children ages 12-16 years) with an immigrant background. While the first-mentioned project had immigrants living in Sweden as its point of departure, Mediated childhoods took the opposite perspective and explored what it is like to be Swedish and live in Greece.

Visual means are being used increasingly in research with children and youth. One reason for this is that it may be difficult to grasp children’s experiences using verbal means alone (Clark & Moss, 2001). Visual methods, like photographs, are often used in empirical research as a way to encourage young people to become co-actors, thereby gaining access to an insider perspective. However, the notion that visual methods automatically imply a children’s perspective has been called into question (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002; Sparrman, 2003). In both of the above-mentioned projects, the young informants were given a disposable camera before the visit at home, the aim being to gain a wider understanding of their media worlds as well as of their daily life in general. What places, things and people are important to them? The photos served as an icebreaker for the latter interview, as a way of establishing rapport with the younger informants (cf. Pink, 2001) and of setting the agenda for the interview – the informants decided what we would talk about. The approach has been called the “auto-driven interview” (Dell Clark, 1999) and “photoeliciting” (Banks, 2001), where the young photo-takers’ talk about the photos is brought to the fore rather than conducting a textual analysis.

The young informants were interviewed in their bedrooms, which provided me with observational information about media access, interests, etc. In the interviews, the children were asked to show me their favourite books, comics or magazines, etc. If they enjoyed playing computer games or used the Internet, we sat in front of the screen together and they showed me their favourite sites or games. This was similar to the diary approach mentioned above.

Comparing this method to those employed in my previous research, using photos made the children more involved in the process, because they largely decided what to talk about. In the projects, the young participants stated that the task of taking photos of things, places and people that were important to them had caused them to reflect on these matters. The asymmetry of power in research with children is often discussed, and based on my experience of using a wide range of methods I feel that using single-use cameras encouraged a more shared research activity, in which the children could guide the research in certain directions. But again, the researcher, still decided what issues or thoughts to look at more closely during the interview, among other things. This is an important aspect, as it points out that participation (in this case taking photos) does not have to imply that all power is in the hands of the photo-taker. It is also worth noting that all research takes place in a certain context, and in this respect photos may be used as a way to present oneself to the “other” (in this case the researcher). There were occasions when the youngsters stated that they had taken a photo of, for example, their school because they thought I might be interested in seeing it. If younger children had participated the method may have worked differently as they would probably have more limited space to take photographs compared to young adolescents, who can more easily move between various places without the control of the parents or the researcher for that matter. By examining three age groups (7, 11 and 15 year-olds) Sharples et al (2003) found that the younger children gladly took photos of family members while the older ones changed its focus to peers and peer culture. Other studies (e.g. Kondo, 2008) have shown that even if younger children (aged 5-8) may put more interest in the camera and how to operate it, the photos taken could, for example, contain other toys than what the parents actually thought their child enjoyed playing with.

One ethical issue facing the researcher is how to present the photos. Although the children and parents consented to publishing the visual material, I have chosen not to publish photos portraying people, as this might compromise confidentiality. The use of visual data in particular raises concerns...
about how much of the private sphere can be placed in the public domain. To what extent should the participants be “protected” in order not to be identified? One common means to achieve confidentiality is to alter the names and characteristics of the participants (e.g., their occupation) who took part in a specific study. But sometimes this may not be enough, and the researcher must reflect on these matters and the consequences of his or her final decision in each specific case. Besides the matter of whether or not to include photos with figures, the researcher must also consider how place is portrayed and how this could affect the promise of anonymity and confidentiality. But the backlash of this is that features crucial to understanding a phenomenon, such as facial expressions, may be concealed, thereby preventing the researcher from supporting a certain claim or from presenting the young informant’s perspective.

In the two projects, the photos turned out to be valuable for better understanding complex issues such as culture, ethnicity and identity. Asking direct questions about such matters may be rather difficult and run the risk of positioning the informant in predetermined categories in terms of e.g. ethnicity. Through the photos the participants touched upon them in a natural way by, for example, taking a photo of a flag and talking about the intentions behind that specific image. Furthermore, the photos taken by the children and young adolescents also served as “visual field notes” for me when analysing the material after having returned from the field, as the photos provided information about the interview situation, the informant and his or her daily life, etc. As the focus of this article is on young people’s media practices, especially related to computer games and the Internet, our attention will now turn to a photo taken by 16-year-old Eric in Athens, a photo showing his laptop (see figure 3). When looking at this photo again after conducting the study, I clearly remember his room, the home, his parents, etc., but also how he at that moment was busy working on a school project. Even the glass on the desk reminds me of how warm that particular day was.

![Figure 3. “You can do almost everything on the computer” (photo by a 16-year-old boy).](image)

Just this specific photo made us discuss a wide range of issues that Eric had been thinking of and what the laptop meant to him. He used the computer mainly for music, chatting and searching for
information, but also talking about how the Net has become an additional communicative arena for talking with classmates about matters that he does not want to discuss face-to-face. When discussing MSN, we also started talking about Eric’s contact with relatives in the US and Sweden and whether he felt the need to keep up-to-date on what was happening in his parents’ homelands. This led to a discussion on which languages he preferred speaking, which in turn affected the type of media content he used. While many of these questions may have been asked in an ordinary interview, the fact that Eric himself had taken a photo of his computer and written about what it meant to him made him more prepared to talk about his computer use, and this was done on his initiative rather than on mine.

Concluding remarks
Researchers are facing new challenges with today’s media convergence, where previously separate mediated expressions and information are now combined and integrated, which in turn creates new patterns of media use. This becomes even more evident when studying children and youth, as they are often eager and curious to try out these new media. It is now time to conclude and sum up some of the critical reflections I have made based on my experiences with conducting media research with children and young adolescents. This article can be seen as a result of the claimed need to develop a more self-critical attitude to one’s research; a self-reflexivity that urges us to ask ourselves why a certain story is told, in what way and by whom. But also to whom we want to address our stories (Ang, 1989; Ehn & Klein, 1994).

The overall aim of my research has been to understand young people’s media use and the meanings they attach to it in daily life. Here, “understanding” is to be seen as a social co-construct – the result of a constant interplay between the researcher and the informant. In the presented studies, the children and young adolescents have been approached in an abductive way; I have been involved in a continual dialogue between theoretical perspectives and concepts, on the one hand, and my empirical fieldwork, on the other. While there may be critics who claim that theoretical perspectives are only an obstacle to understanding things from children’s perspectives, in my opinion theory and empirical data should not be seen as polar opposites. Instead, they can benefit from each other and help us better understand a given phenomenon. This does not mean, of course, that we should impose adult academic categories on children’s statements, which may affect their original meanings and mislead the reader.

The necessity to find various ‘ways’ to understand young people’s usage of computer games and the Internet has been stressed throughout the article. A contextual perspective is advocated, where a medium must always be understood and studied in relation to other media and the daily life of the young user. This has become a necessity in today’s media landscape with its features of convergence and intertextuality. Furthermore, in any kind of research, it is crucial not to conceive of and treat young people as a homogenous group; differences as well as similarities will always be found as a function of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, taste, style, etc. This not only has implications for the presentation of empirical material, but also for the sample and the methods used. Researchers need to be attentive to young people’s different competences and their preferred means of communicating with unfamiliar adults (Clark & Moss 2001; Punch, 2002). Another crucial aspect that I would like to draw the reader’s attention to is the great value of getting to know the children’s environment (through, e.g., a diary or photos) as a means of getting acquainted and thereby establishing trust between the child and the researcher.
Naturally, the claim that one is conducting research from children’s perspectives can always be called into question, as we can never look at the world through the eyes of another person; what he or she is actually seeing, the thoughts and emotions evoked by a gaze in a certain moment. We as researchers have only indirect methods to grasp this. But what a researcher can do is to clearly state the specific meanings attached to a children’s perspective and its implications for the conducted study in relation to its purpose (e.g., why this particular study, which questions are not raised), the sample, the methods chosen, and the interpretation and presentation of the empirical material. All of these central aspects of the research process are in turn imbued with various power relations, which the researcher must take into consideration, looking at how such relations may affect the study. And as Halldén (2003) reminds us, it is crucial to ask who is making the claim about a children’s perspective and for what purpose, as the term has ideological undertones and may be used for certain economical and political aims or as a way to conceal the researcher’s true purpose.

When talking about children’s perspectives, children’s rights and participation during the research process should be stressed. This is not only a matter of protecting young participants by promising them, for example, anonymity, but also a matter of reciprocity – giving something back to the informants (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Much of the discussion has concerned the former, and looking at my own research, very little feedback has been given to the participants after the field work. Perhaps I have sent a working paper presenting the main results to, for example, involved families, but such papers are written in adult academic language and make little sense to young participants (perhaps not even to their parents). Thus, in addition to elaborating on the methods used in research with children, we should also reflect much more on how we discuss and present our results in a comprehensible way for participants in a project. Furthermore, researchers should not only look at their own position during the fieldwork or at how to present results, but they should also get feedback from participants, throughout the research process, on their experiences of being involved in a study (cf. Punch, 2002).

References


