Abstract: The RidgiDidge Study is a qualitative research project that addresses the question of how new media technology figures in the lives of High School students in South Eastern Queensland. Criticism of young people’s media consumption highlights a preoccupation with effects and behaviour, displaying a failure to acknowledge young people as social agents in their own right. The theoretical framework outlined here imbricates Sociology and Cultural Studies in the service of appropriately describing young people’s position in society and foregrounding agency in relation to media consumption. This might reasonably result in a non-judgemental and inter-generational understanding of young people’s media consumption at both political and community levels. With this in mind, the implementation of this framework in the RidgiDidge Study suggests that the domestication of media technologies is a more useful approach to understanding young people’s media consumption than affordance, social determinism, or technical determinism might allow for. This approach is supported at the micro-level by the responses of M8, a Year 10 male participant in the RidgiDidge Study whose media consumption follows the adoption cycle indicated by a domestication perspective.

Current Myths
Ideas about young people and media in Australia often publicly emerge within the confines of an ‘effects’ debate. This debate is characterised by the assumption of a direct relationship between anti-social or non-normative behaviour and media consumption. In this way, young media consumers are contextualised as a passive, easily manipulated audience with their media consumption assumed responsible for a range of negative health and social issues. These assumptions persist in the public domain despite any coherent theory or conclusive research in support of such ideas (Barker and Petley 2001). Recent analysis has shown that Australian political leaders have contributed to this perspective, perpetuating the myths of young people as apathetic community members, as deviant and too dependant on technology (Vromen 2004). This perception was encapsulated by the Governor-General Michael Jeffery in a recent speech where he said that ‘prising children away from their TV's, DVD's and
PlayStations would be a good start in combating "diabesity" (Jeffery 2004). While the intent of this statement is noble in its context, it oversimplifies the issue of young people's media consumption and the spheres of influence surrounding their lives. The problem with maintaining a negative or simplistic characterisation of young people and their media consumption is that it colours concepts of youth and childhood given that any *description* becomes a *prescription* for what and how youth and childhood should be (Jamrozic and Sweeney 1996: 33). However, research conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) in response to community concerns about young people's media consumption, has acknowledged the active engagement of young people with their media (Nightingale 2000; Sheldon et al 1994). This body of work has highlighted the disparity between adult perceptions of young people's relationship to media and the views of young people themselves.

Attitudinal research such as this has highlighted the need for a 'non-judgemental and inter-generational understanding' of young people and their media consumption at both political and community levels (Nightingale 2000: 58). With this in mind, this discussion will outline the development and implementation of the theoretical framework of the RidgiDidge Study, a current PhD research project where young people's media consumption is seen beyond 'effects', behaviour, and statistical patterns of usage towards more useful and ethical research.

**Sociology and Cultural Studies: The best of both worlds**

The imbrication of Sociology and Cultural Studies offers an interdisciplinary approach that gives weight to the personal experiences and perceptions of young people about their media consumption in a culturally specific context. This in turn might reasonably come to dispel the myths about young people, their media
consumption, and put prospective research on a firm theoretical footing, addressing criticism of young people's media research derived from social psychological models. As McRobbie notes, ‘cultural studies flaunts its wild style [and] sociology prides itself on its materialist steadfastness’ (McRobbie 1994: 177), a point that suggests that the combination of theoretical agility (Cultural Studies) and a grounded method of inquiry (Sociology), will produce a cogent contribution to the area of researching young people. McRobbie suggests that Sociology should consider that,

It is no longer possible to conceptualise and analyse society as a whole, or even as a layered and uneven totality. There can be no longer one big picture, and that kind of theoretical imaging of ‘society’ which gave sociology its existence, is exactly what is now being disputed (McRobbie 1994: 177).

The emergent paradigm of childhood sociology addresses this point (James and Prout 1997: 29) and encourages a new agenda for the discussion of young people’s media issues suggesting a synergistic relationship between disciplines. In this way, young people's media research might enjoy the best of both worlds by adopting an anti-essentialist approach to the personal and lived experience of participants (Sociology) as well as connecting this range of experiences with concepts of difference and subjectivity (Cultural Studies).

Getting real

It is this acknowledgment of difference and subjectivity that suggests that young people's media research should be contextualised as *illustrative* of groups of young people rather than *representative* of young people as an aggregate. As Finch argues, it is more pragmatic to accept this research outlook given that the relationship between research and social policy and is never direct. As James points out in reference to Finch's work,
Decisions are made (or avoided) through complex political processes within which sociologists may (or may not) have an influential but rarely, if ever, a determining role (James 1997: 29).

Given this problem, Finch suggests a more democratic approach where all institutional and societal strata are privy to such illustrative information rather than just the top levels of social policy decision making (Finch 1986).

With this in mind, the pursuit of the democratisation of knowledge is more likely to foster the inter-generational understanding warranted in the service of dispelling the myths of youth and childhood. This illustrative context also has the benefit of eschewing the temptation to present research results from small groups of available participants as though such results might easily apply to the whole population.

Thus, research results are contextualised as applicable only to those groups of individuals participating in research. In this way, the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods grounds research, producing a fleshed-out view of young research participants and their perceptions.

The Emergent Paradigm of New Sociology

Having outlined an interdisciplinary approach, culturally specific research might reasonably be related to the broader issues of culture and society under what James and Prout refer to as the emergent ‘paradigm of new sociology’ (James and Prout 1997: 29). The central tenets of this paradigm acknowledge that childhood is a social construction and as such, is a variable of social analysis that cannot be divorced from variables such as gender, ethnicity, or class. The emergent paradigm also foregrounds young people’s agency and that their relationships and cultures are worthy of study in
their own right (James 1997: 8). In this way, childhood and youth is acknowledged as a transient biological life stage for the human being, but recognised as a permanent structural category in society. In this way, it is appropriate to describe young people as co-constructors of society in that they are influenced by, as well as influencing, parents, teachers, and those with whom they regularly interact. This process can be articulated through Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development, a taxonomy of social influences that surround young people’s lives and experiences (Bronfenbrenner 1979). These influences include the family and the classroom (microsystems), where these environments interact (mesosystem), the influence of an environment where the young person is not directly involved such as the parent's workplace (exosystem) and the wider cultural context (macrosystem).

The conflation of the emergent paradigm and Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development supports the idea that despite manifestations of structural indifference towards children, external forces can and do affect young people (Qvortrup 1992: 12). However, it is argued that the dynamic of such a model for the most part remains one-way with young people’s co-construction of society not being explicitly stated.

In this regard, research among and about young people needs to account for the activity of young people as social agents, an active audience or as autonomous individuals capable of a range of media readings, uses and practices (Buckingham 1993). The inclusion of the emergent paradigm in illustrative research and contemporary discussions about young people might reasonably address this problem in terms of foregrounding young people's agency in relation to their media consumption.
Putting theory into practice

The discussion that follows suggests that early analysis of the RidgiDidge Study results support the theoretical approach outlined here. While space here does not allow for a full discussion of the results, the contribution to the study made by M8, a Year 10 male participant, is promising in illustrating the usefulness of the approach suggested.

The RidgiDidge Study addresses the question of how new media technology figures in the lives of a small group of State High School students in SouthEast Queensland. Volunteers completed a survey, a 7-day media diary and participated in a videotaped semi-structured individual interview at three research intervals over an eighteen-month period. Given the pursuit of a 'non-judgemental and inter-generational understanding' of young people's media consumption, the research included two essential features. Firstly, the adoption of a grounded theory methodology and an ethical regard for participants ensured that the research focused on the views of the participants themselves. The key to this feature is that the personal views of participants' discipline the emergent theory, avoiding the potential to interpret participant views through adult understanding.

Secondly, these findings are reported back to the participants' and their communities as part of the research protocol where the democratisation of knowledge is valued and implemented.

In the context of the RidgiDidge Study, media consumption is defined as the media content and technologies participants have access to in their homes and bedrooms.
These technologies include the computer, the Internet, games systems, and the mobile phone as well traditional media forms such as television and radio.

While young people have been described as apathetic, deviant and 'too dependant on technology' (Vromen 2004), the RidgiDidge data suggests that a homogenous view of young people is misleading, particularly given the richness of individual responses such as M8's. Although apathy and deviance *per se* was not addressed in the context of the study, technological dependence is defined as the displacement of young people's non-media activities such as socialising with friends, family and playing sport by media consumption. When asked if there was a piece of new media technology they could not live without, M8, responded,

M8: (Laughs) probably the computer. I mean all the games and stuff coming out these days. All my friends saying 'have you tried this'? 'No', 'oh I'll burn you a copy'. Yeah, probably the computer.

KL: So more so than say TV?
M8: Yeah, I could probably live without [TV] for a couple of days, a week, two weeks.

Despite an apparent dependence on his computer, M8's quantitative profile shows that most of his free time is spent playing sport (AFL) outside school hours. This suggests a preference for, rather than a dependence on, his available technology. In this way, M8's media consumption is incorporated *into* his social life, rather than displacing it.

This suggests the validity of a domestication approach where the adoption of technology follows a cycle of *imagination, appropriation, objectification incorporation and conversion* (Ling 2004: 28).
In basic terms, this is the trajectory where an individual becomes aware of a technology, sees how it can be of use, associates a sense of identity with the technology, makes it part of life before finally becoming identified with use of the technology. This identification or conversion stage in M8's social context suggests that media consumption becomes a factor in how he perceives how he appears to others in his social circle (Ling 2004: 30). As M8 points out,

M8: Well, we recently got a new computer, and I go over to my friend's house and we've got like a Local Area Network, an L-A-N, its quite fun.  
KL: So are you playing games like 'Medal of Honour'?  
M8: Yeah, we all take our computers over to someone's house and we hook it all up together and start playing against each other. That's pretty fun.  
KL: Are we talking laptops?  
M8: No, towers, monitors the whole bit  
KL: The people that you are in the LAN with, do you see them socially or just with the LAN?  
M8: I see them at school, sit with them, see them all the time, really. They're good mates.

While the social use of media technology is apparent in this conversation with M8, technical and social deterministic approaches or the concept of affordance do not resonate here as much as a domestication approach given the emphasis on the consumption of technology in the everyday lives of individuals. As Ling points out,

Domestication looks at both the interaction between the individual and the artefact and the social context in which the artefacts are being defined and used. …Domestication looks at the role of the particular item in the way that life is lived out through our consumption and the use of various objects and services. It also treats the adoption and use of objects and services as dynamic and changing (Ling 2004: 33).

Acknowledging M8's subjectivity reveals his media consumption as an active practice. In one context, M8's enthusiasm for computer game playing is reflected in his willingness to lug 'towers, monitors, the whole bit' to another location for social gaming. In another context, M8 is critical and selective in how he gathers information
suggesting that media consumption, in Ling's terms, is indeed 'dynamic and changing' (Ling 2004: 33). As M8 points out in response to whether he finds the Internet useful for information gathering,

   M8: Yeah probably, it really depends. If you look for the weather, then you can use TV. Channel 7, 10, or whatever. 'What's the weather for that'? These days the Internet is full of stuff you don't need. If you go to a search engine and you type in 'weather', it comes up with different things that you don't need.
   KL: Which search engine do you use?
   M8: Google.com. It's a pretty popular one. If you're looking for something in particular, like a history thing, it wouldn't come up with that, it'd come up with something else. You've got to know what you're looking for.

Alongside this display of selective media consumption and media literacy is the idea that taste and aestheticism act as mechanisms of social and cultural power, often in conjunction with moral, ethical and communal sensibilities. In this way, 'everyday perceptual schemes and resources [are] used by actors to accomplish a judgement of taste (Woodward and Emmison 2001: 296). In this way, the exercise of taste in terms of media consumption involves 'an attunement to others, a disciplining or "tempering" of the self in order to 'fit in', and a general respect for other people' (Woodward and Emmison 2001: 315).

As M8 points out when asked if he preferred to use his media technology for anything else other than games,

   M8: Yeah, probably. It really depends because I have other siblings and they're on the computer a lot. [They say] 'I've got to do my assignment to do', so I never get the chance [to play games as much as I'd like]. I'm booked out a lot lately. I've got Tuesday night Football, Thursday Football, Saturday football.
This indicates a negotiation between the individual and other family members over media technology use, a point supported by the communal purchase and consumption of technologies by participants and their families according to the quantitative data. This can be seen as the exercise of social and cultural power where media consumption becomes a site where M8 takes charge of his life where he can, often in ways not necessarily predicted by the dominant ideologies of family and commercially provided culture.

With this in mind, the theoretical outline here offers a way of more appropriately contextualising young people’s position in society as well as fostering an inter-generational understanding between adults and young people about their media consumption. In this way, the imbrication of Cultural Studies and Sociology creates a synergistic relationship between disciplines that allows a much more useful approach towards understanding young people's media consumption, particularly when it is their views that discipline the research.

References


