The task of interpretation: Children walking 'Facebook streets'[1]

Ranjana Das,
University of Leicester, UK.

Abstract
In this paper, I ask in what ways our knowledge about the interpretation of genres, emergent from many decades of empirical research with mass media audiences, is useful in understanding engagement with new media. This conceptual task is pursued empirically by applying a conceptual repertoire derived from reception analysis to interviews with youthful users of the online genre of social networking sites (SNSs). A conceptual repertoire from audience reception studies is used to analyse findings from conversations with children using the online genre of social networking sites. Drawing a parallel between audience interpretation and new media use, in this paper, the roles, responsibilities and tasks involved in navigating an online genre are outlined with the help of four mutually intersecting categories. The tasks are those of collaboration, critique, intertextuality and tackling textual interruptions, and their borders interact in messy relationships. The interpretative contract which symbolises a relationship of mutuality between text and reader, media and audience, technology and user, is mobilized to conclude that there are significant parallels between audience reception and new media use, at both theoretical and empirical levels.

Keywords: interpretation, audiences, users, social networking, children.

A text-reader analysis
This paper presents work from a project where I primarily addressed those within media and communications studies who research mass media audiences and their engagement with a diverse range of texts. I asked in what ways our knowledge about the interpretation of genres, emergent from many decades of empirical research with mass media audiences, is useful in understanding engagement with new media. This conceptual task was pursued empirically by applying a conceptual repertoire derived from reception analysis to interviews with youthful users of the online genre of social networking sites (SNSs). In presenting a text-reader analysis of youthful engagement with an online genre (see also
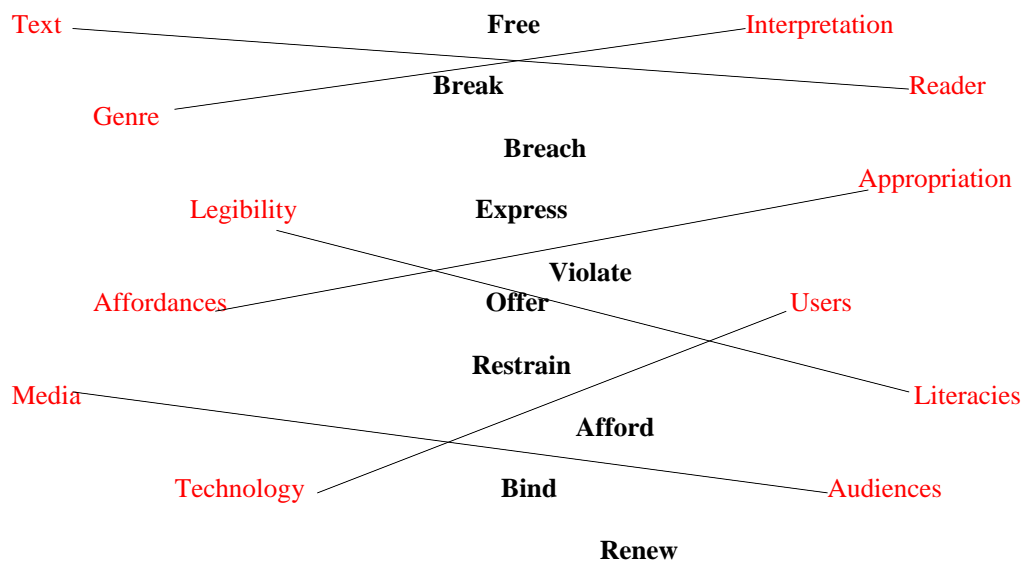
Das, 2011), this paper explores four broad (and not exhaustive) categories of tasks involved in interpretive work. The paper is organised in two major sections, the first of which outlines a range of tasks involved in interpretation, and the second discusses the tasks themselves, with illustrative instances. The attempt with these is not to outline a taxonomy of any sort, but to draw attention to the range of tasks these children perform (or not) in social networking. Note Iser, writing for the interpretation of printed (literary) texts:

> We look forward, we look back, we decide, we change our decisions, we form expectations, we are shocked by their nonfulfillment, we question, we muse, we accept, we reject; this is the dynamic process of recreation. (1980, p. 289).

Many definitions of media literacy, at least in their focus on analytical, evaluative and critical tasks, parallel what Iser says above. There is, here, a recognition of the complexity and range of tasks involved in interpretation, true of digital literacies as well. In what ways is this exercise – of identifying strands of tasks at all a useful one, are all these dimensions at all necessary, what has been ignored and what highlighted?

Interpretive work: the task of interpretation

This paper, in connecting interpretation and literacies, treats both interpretation and literacies as work, following Liebes and Katz's (1993) conceptualization of the task of interpretation in audiences interpreting *Dallas. Interpretive work*, by definition then includes a doing noun – work – inscribed into it. There is a range of tasks to do, responsibilities to fulfil in relation to the text and in relation to the expectations that one holds of the text. Definitions of media literacies on the other hand make such work amply clear – in analyzing, evaluating, critiquing and creating the media, there are tasks to be performed. Hence, perhaps, Iser's reminder of looking forward, backward, deciding, changing decisions, forming expectations, questioning and musing fit appropriately into the category of interpretive work. In interpreting, there are tasks of commuting involved – from the text to the social world, especially when the social world is inscribed continuously into a continually changing text, hence perhaps Liebes and Katz's notion of referential readings (1993). But there is also a task of commuting between modes, genres and even media, as interactive spaces are increasingly multi-generic and multi-modal, reminding us of concepts such as intertextuality, which lie at the heart of textual analysis (for a fuller review of contemporary discussions of these questions see Das et. al. forthcoming 2013; also Das, 2010). The concept of the interpretative contract, as outlined in the figure below reminds us of how the contractual relationship of mutuality between the interpreter and that which is interpreted (Livingstone, 2008) can be breached (by a resistant reader) or accepted (by a reader whose meanings align themselves with inscribed ideologies in the text). There are always thus, a range of potential interpretations, although finite.

Text — Free — Interpretation

Break — Reader

Genre

Breach

Appropriation

Legibility — Express

Violate

Affordances — Offer — Users

Restrain

Media — Afford — Literacies

Technology — Bind — Audiences

Renew

Fig 1: The interpretative contract.

Methodology

The work presented here derives from a study which sought to understand the ways in which concepts that lay at the heart of audience reception studies illuminate our understanding of the ways in which people use new media – hence a 'text-reader' analysis of children's engagement with an online genre. In this paper I use empirical material illustratively to bring out a range of responsibilities involved in children's use of social networking sites where I frame use as interpretive work. I use concepts from audience studies to interpret findings from a project with 60 children between the ages of 11 to 18, who go online on social networking – and I seek to make sense of their work online, with this repertoire[2]. Analysis for the project adopted an in-between stance between theory-led, a priori coding and inductive, immersive coding (see Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The interpretative logic of the four tasks

In what follows, children's interpretive work is presented in a set of four tasks, which are by necessity, overlapping ones. These lie midway between deductive and inductive logics of analysis and interpretation. The first three – lateral referencing in interpretation, tackling interruptions in interpretation and critique in interpretation– are largely deductive categories, emergent from the theoretical repertoire mobilized for this study. They animate concepts such as encountering textual spaces of restraint i.e. interruptions, or the role of critique and resistance in encountering texts, and the role of intertextuality in contextualizing a genre in a range of diverse others and within the social world, of course. The fourth category – play, pleasure and connection in interpretation, is a largely inductive category made necessary by the fact that the Web 2.0 text being interpreted by these youthful voices is both co-authored by many (within limits) and in being co-authored is co-realized. Each set of deductively selected tasks is used to bring together a largely inductive

set of sub-tasks, emergent from conversations with children as they went online. So, for instance – the primarily deductive category – critique in interpretation, includes acts of ignoring persuasion, resisting manipulation, ignoring inconsistencies, being semantically and syntactically critical and often, not doing any of these tasks.

Instances of both ends abound. Here, the overall task of critique (semantic and well as syntactic) (Liebes and Katz, 1993), and of resistance is a primarily deductive category emergent from the empirical insights of audience reception studies, which for instance have highlighted the role of resistance in interpretation, but also from definitions of media literacy, which have the task of critique, analysis and evaluation inscribed in its ambitions. Other dimensions, for instance being circumspect or daring in engaging with the text, or in being collaborative or individualistic are largely inductive aspects, emergent from the empirical data.

Of course, by using the word dimension or task in place of category or mode I indicate that these are not part of a typology of any sort, are barely indicative of a range of tasks to be performed in interpretation and hence, far from exhaustive, but more importantly these aspects overlap, their boundaries intersect and touch each other. So, is the task of resistance entirely different from the task of being intertextually aware of the norms and conventions of a genre? Is intertetxuality in interpretation entirely unrelated to the task of being collaborative? Surely not. This paper makes it its task to take apart a section of a range of many different acts one performs in interpretation. A brief description of these dimensions is summarized in the Table below, where, for every dimension, I pay attention to the role of the text and that of the reader.

Lateral referencing in interpretation

Lateral referencing seems strikingly close to the concept of intertextuality, although in itself, I use the term 'lateral referencing' to refer to a far more restricted account than what the theory of intertextuality proposes. Intertextuality, as a concept, entered the parlance of communication and cultural studies through Kristeva's work (1984). The theory of intertextuality includes broadly two dimensions – the intertextuality inscribed in the production of texts because the author has read texts before writing it and the text does not exist in isolation, and the lateral connections made across texts in the act of reading. Following Gunther Kress, texts are born in a reading, or lateral interpretations, where one genre is almost always compared with, connected with or tied into others, and where spaces within a genre are interpreted as interlinked and often woven into a narrative of connection. Generic similarities and dissimilarities are discovered, with varied amounts of information and speculation, reminding us often of what Livingstone had called the knowledgeable reader (Livingstone, 1998a). Meinhof and Smith, in introducing their edited collection on intertextuality and the media, remind us of the superficiality of the claim that all texts bear semblances of other texts, and that there is an interaction between texts, authors, readers and their lifeworlds (2000). In a sense the discussion presented here is more restricted than the horizon opened up by Meinhof and Smith above, because it draws

Task	Range of interpretative work involved	Note
Lateral referencing in interpretation	Being informed of a genre in the context of others Developing expertise in identifying generic conventions Speculating Comparing	Lateral connections exist with what went before. The text exists in a specific aesthetic, economic, social and cultural location. It provides a range of possible interpretations with a range of possible consequences.
Tackling interruptions in interpretation	Resolving problems Ignoring persuasion Being circumspect Daring Stumbling	The text provides spaces for (potential) problems. Sometimes, there are opportunities for resolutions embedded in the text, in varied degrees of accessibility.
Critique in interpretation	Resisting persuasion Critiquing manipulation Being sceptical Trusting Accepting	Spaces within the text are designed to persuade, misrepresent, manipulate or deceive. These spaces may either resource or restrain those who interact with the text. Spaces within the text promise potential possibilities. These may sometimes be deceptive.
Play, pleasure and connection in interpretation	Engaging Participating Linking the text and the world Disconnecting	The nature of the text makes available opportunities for engaging with others, as well as spaces for representing oneself or pursuing goals which do not require collaboration.

Table 1: The task of interpretation

attention to users' references in reading – these references calling on various types of knowledge of other genres and other forms. It is that specific aspect that I wish to highlight in what follows, rather than pursuing the more global account of intertextuality in interpretation.

Hybridity in the birth of a genre seems clear in the lateral ways in which they are read. Two 16-year-old boys, attending private schooling outside of London, and invested in developing software, hardware and generally, a future in technology, tell me how Facebook has been designed as an excellent advertising tool. The link one of them intriguingly draws on is not with another member of the same genre but rather with a video-sharing site, reminding us of Kress's (2003) point on hybrid genres being born from pre-existing or contemporary others. Neal tells me, "So many people use Facebook these days, it is an excellent advertising tool. It happens on YouTube as well, you will get adverts for certain things, most of the time you'll just completely ignore them, but there will be one or two which look pretty interesting."

Samuel looks at the genre as a whole, covering Myspace, Facebook, Orkut and many others, and provides his critical take on public scripts around advertising on SNSs. Note how he works out a different 'strategy' of reconciling the commercial nature of these services, drawing attention not only to the conventionalized nature of interactions (Kress, 2003), but also the continuously established conventions that make these kinds of strategies necessary, and interactions possible. Samuel reasons "What people can't appreciate is that when you think about it, if you were going to set up a server and code the Facebook, it would take years and it would cost millions, and people don't think…they think, how dare they advertise to us, but how come they're not charging for it, but would you rather be paying £2, 3, 6 a month and not be advertised to or rather just have someone advertise to you and be able to completely ignore it. Basically it is a subscription service, or should be so."

Interestingly, reading laterally, and being at the highest possible end of being informed and knowledgeable is not simply a question of meta-comparisons between generic similarities across diverse Web 2.0 forms. Fifteen-year-old Martin has learned how to distinguish similarities and differences between micro-spaces within the genre where internal and external commercial presences can be discerned. He has followed a line of adverts, despite clearly ignoring them, to begin to develop a typology of sorts between which ones will keep him within the textual boundaries of Facebook and which ones will push him further away. Like Iser's sentences, where the one prepares the context for the next, every individual advert then perhaps contains 'a preview of the next' and forms 'a kind of viewfinder for what is to come' (1974, p. 279). Martin points out subtle differences between the various kinds of commercial advertisements on Facebook. When asked what the difference is, he reveals an implicit trust in the brand of Facebook. He says "a Facebook ad would be advertising a utility that you haven't…maybe you don't use or they're suggesting is useful for you, obviously another ad would be just advertising materials and things like that from shops and stuff."

In a similar comparison of generic forms with another generic form, 12-year-olds Ewen and Agit, focused and dedicated gamers on Facebook, largely disconnected from anything else on the site except the games, compare the textual affordances of games by comparing graphics between multiple versions of what at first appears to them to be an

entirely different game, but which they ultimately grasp to be similar. While one challenges you to grow a farm where crops die unless you tend to them, another challenges the player to keep virtual fish as pets that die unless you go back and feed them regularly. Ewen's profile below kept receiving pop-up reminders for him to feed his fish.

> Interviewer: "Oh, look! So two Fishvilles have come up right here...."
> Ewen: "I've done it 10 times."
> Agit: "I've done it twice."
> Interviewer: "So, do you think it's the same as Farmville or Yoville?"
> Agit: "Yoville is completely different."
> Interviewer: "How is it different?"
> Ewen: "So is Farmville."
> Agit: "None of the games are like exactly each other, but some of the pet games are like that, Pet Society, like Petville."
> Interviewer: "How are they similar?"
> Ewen: "They are like the same because exactly the same thing, you do the same thing, but like it's got different kind of graphics."

Trans-genre similarities and differences contribute to what Jauss calls the *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectations) where the norms of the genre, and contemporary familiar literary-historical surroundings play a role in intertextual appreciation of a text. MSN for instance, belongs elsewhere, and not quite in the same category as Facebook, but John, an older teen, compares them thus in a similar 'surrounding' by means of comparing evolutionary stages: "I think Facebook almost grew out of the internet, didn't they, and [this] take[s] them to almost something like a more MSN-ish point". Similarly, Mark compares Facebook with Amazon, somewhat surprisingly. He feels wise, although his comparisons are not necessarily plausible – "Amazon is sort of the best one because it's, you know, when it was originally created it was set up to be live chat and everything. Whereas Facebook chat, you know, is sort of in its infant stage. It would be good if you could kind of use it a few more, like those smileys and everything, just, you know, joke around and everything, but I know it's basic for what it is. But, you know, the whole point about Facebook isn't to chat live."

Like Mark, Leanne, an older teen, rationalizes the differences between Facebook Chat and Myspace by outlining how the chat is not the primary function of Facebook, whereas for MSN it is. She says, "Facebook, as I said, I think it's like just for looking at people's photos and just checking out their life and stuff, but I mean like they're good at that as well. But this is just like, you know, just to make people go on it a bit more, and it's just put the chat thing in as well. But MSN is like designed to have chat, so they're like more...how do I say it? They're focused more on the functions more just for chatting, if you know what I mean, so I just think it's better, and they design it more [unclear] is just right, it's not just put on the side." And yet, for 12-year-old Cole, it is specifically because Facebook isn't live that it isn't 'real'. He struggles to explain to me how MSN is different from Skype which is different from Facebook chat – thereby extracting one component of

Facebook (the chat) into a comparison with other pre-existing and stand-alone chatting platforms, and in the end, settles for "Skype is like MSN, but you can actually say words and you can speak".

A slightly different kind of lateral referencing in reading is evidenced by 11-year-old Arthur who has worked out that there is a task in developing one's own narrative of expertise. Applications (like the game or the chat, another micro-space within the broader genre) must be mastered in some sequence where expertise evolves over time. One link is similar to another, but there are ones more complicated than the last. Each then provides an insight into the next, something grasped through learning by doing, as Arthur explains that "you start off with like the basic apps, like links and those, videos and groups and then you can just, when you go onto something, you can add it down there, and then you go on to newer ones and then you just know the next ones and you just know." Later Arthur connects newspaper spaces with Twitter celebrities and their Facebook profiles, using one to trace another and using that to work out the genuineness of Facebook profiles. He stumbles in demonstrating it to me, as we discuss what he decides is a genuine Beyoncé profile, because it has "proper pictures". But he explains the newspaper–Twitter–Facebook link adeptly, and is on his way to sifting out the genuine from the fake, although the task of critiquing what he decides to be genuine is another question altogether. He points out that some of Twitter's celebrities are on Facebook, and when asked how he knows that these are not false profiles, he speaks of a strategy, "a picture of a celebrity, a proper picture, where something will be official, like that, and you know it's there [...] like in the London paper, they have like Twitter days. It gives you Twitter names, so like if you search a name it will come up. If you search a name it will come up with ten options, but the one with the most followers is bound to be her, and the one which sounds like her is bound to be her."

Public scripts around expectations and concerns about these online spaces get intertwined with generic speculations stemming from mis/information in the conversation below, between Shayaana and Abby, two 13-year-old girls at an inner London state school where safety concerns on and offline seem to echo across the children. Shayaana and Abby place Facebook and Myspace in the same comparative frame and then seem to diverge in the anticipations they have of these two in terms of safety. The consensus they reach is a confident, albeit misinformed one perhaps, where they think Facebook is about to end by Easter 2010. This consensus is ambiguous, and obviously misinformed because now they think Facebook is pay for access. The comparisons, however, are intriguing.

> Shayaana: "Myspace is kind of like Facebook but the only thing that's different is like random people add you. Like older people add you and…."
> Abby: "And Myspace I think is more safe than Facebook because on Facebook you can just…people can just add you and you don't even notice."
> Interviewer: "No, but she's saying that Facebook is safer than Myspace, right?"

> Shayaana: "Yeah, I think that Facebook is safer."
> Abby: "I don't at all because if you think…if you read about in the newspapers everyone is getting is…."
> Shayaana: "Facebook, never Myspace. There used to be…."
> Abby: "I told you like when Myspace got paid and Facebook was for free everyone stopped…what? Why is it like this?"
> Shayaana: "And everyone stopped Myspace and went to Facebook because like it was for free. And now because in February it's going to come and they said February/March, and they said that Facebook is going to finish and they're all going to rush to Myspace or Bebo or something."

And thus, comparisons and an analysis of not only similarities and differences, but also the potential reasons – evolutionary, commercial, social – behind these similarities and differences between genres and within genres are analysed in interpretation. Staying for a moment with Shayaana and Abby's stories about fears of negative spaces on Facebook, I now move on to 'tackling interruptions in interpretation', where my focus lies especially on the interruptions brought about by negative experiences or spaces contained within the text.

Tackling interruptions in interpretation

> Whenever the flow in interrupted (in the text) and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in the gaps left by the text itself. (Iser et al, 1980, p. 280)

The stories in this section are not happy ones, because they represent a narrative of suspicion, fear and being wary when exploring what Kelly, 16, has aptly termed 'Facebook streets'. The interruptions I highlight here are potentially dangerous. There are many potential interruptions to interpretation and following Iser (1974), boredom and overstrain are key ones I followed. Interestingly, contrary to expectations of boredom with repetitive games and spam or overstrain with difficulties in blocking annoying adverts, the most striking (and for me, unanticipated) interruptions in being on Facebook came up in the form of fear of the unknown, punctuated with media images and everyday talk about 'paedos' and old men, occasionally by personal experiences with good looking men and most importantly, a range of strategies to keep things steady. I note here, that these stories, like all empirical data, are open to analysis and interpretation from a diversity of angles – in this case children's perceptions of online risks being a conversation where the stories below fit aptly. A text-reader analysis will, I hope, allow me to focus on the link between what is anticipated of the text, what expertise is developed as a consequence and the diversity in strategies these make evident.

Kelly, 16, on being stalked by a parent, has with time, developed a calm and collected strategy of making herself almost invisible on Facebook. Rishona, nearly 14, however, enjoys the fun of sifting out "nice" people on Facebook from the ones who are not

so nice by guessing if their photos are Google images or genuine ones. She does not seek help in this task. The contract demands that ambiguous spaces (in this case, unknown strangers posing to be friends) are interpreted reflexively, leading to walks down one of three pathways in interfacing with the text. The first is to get into trouble and stumble, the second is to work out a strategy of avoiding these spaces and the third perhaps is a mix – to experiment, take risks and to work out what happens next. Rishona does this last, while 11-year-old Ryan chooses the second.

> Rishona: "If I don't think that he's nice, or whatever, so I'll first meet him online, when I first meet him I'll go do searches when he first added me, I'll make sure that like they are not like obviously from like Google or something."

> Interviewer: "What would people get from Google?"

> Rishona: "Oh, well, some of my friends used to be funny, well, they used to make fake accounts, so like they only add people they know. So they'll make fake accounts and then find photos of models on Google and be like, I'm a really good looking guy. So they add...so like it looks like they have loads of like really good looking guys. So you can tell if they're fake or not."

The much more cautious Ryan and Belinda, both 11, who clearly do not enjoy this game, tell me stories they have heard when adults discuss the news. Both know they must be careful on Facebook and Ryan unsurely, but convincingly, reports a rape and murder story he has heard, thus – "they were arranging to meet and there's this girl that, um...she went missing that day when she met them...and she like bad things they did to her and she died or something". He is scared of 'Facebook streets' and puts multiple precautions in place in anticipation of similar incidents. His friend had her number passed on by her best friend to someone on MSN, from where a Facebook concern became an MSN-Facebook-Mobile phone concern and then an offline concern. He notes that he, unlike his friends, will "just watch who I add and if I don't know someone, I won't just go up to them and say, swear at them. I mean, I won't go click onto them and just say, why the effing heck are you adding me or something."

> Ryan: "I've got my dad and my uncles on Facebook."
> Belinda: "And I've got like cousins and all that on Facebook, so they know what I'm chatting about."
> Ryan: "There's this thing, yeah, where it says information and my sisters, no, my cousin, yeah, um, she put her number or something. There's this thing under friends where you can put your phone number up and.... No, she didn't put her phone number but there's other people that does and, um, she was on MSN. Her friend, yeah, she gave her a number and then her friend gave her numbers to some other boy because she.... So, some boy took her friend's phone and started putting all numbers into his phone,

yeah, and he phoned my cousin at my uncle's birthday party. My uncle's like huge, strong and that and then, um, yeah, and then he rung and he started being all rude and that. And it was over Facebook as well and that."

Shayaana, 13, shows me how she is being pursued by a stranger online, and how her account is being hacked, in her opinion. The conversation comes up as an interruption, literally in a conversation on joining Facebook groups for protecting the rain forest. Unlike Ryan, Rishona or Kelly, she is confused and does not quite know what she might do. Her friend Abby 'figures out' the age of the person trying to befriend her and refers to media stories for supporting her guess.

> Shayaana: "See look, right here. I don't know this man and he's trying to accept me as his friend – I don't know him."
> Interviewer: "Okay…."
> Abby: "I know he's older than you, they will have to be. Because on Facebook like you can see it on the news, sometimes they're telling really bad stuff about it."
> Shayaana: "You don't know him and I don't know him."
> Abby: "Hmm…."
> Shayaana: "This is the way people hack you. Someone has put on my Bebo that I'm 22, which I'm not."
> Interviewer: "You didn't do that?"
> Shayaana: "No."

Shaheen and Bahri, 15, have just co-experienced with their entire Year group an interesting incident of someone pretending to be a gay paedophile, although they remained unclear on how they were so sure it was a question of pretence alone. Bahri too, like Rishona, enjoyed the game to an extent until it became scary, which is when his Year group reported the person. What is striking perhaps is that, for many of these stories there is an added value of excitement in pursuing these spaces of potential danger with self-selected strategies of safeguarding oneself. The text presents boundaries which may have one of two effects. As Iser puts it (1974), the 'text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play' (p. 275). These teens do not quite leave the field of play even when things go too far, but they do stop and mobilize resources to continue in it.

> Bahri: "We had an experience during the summer: some guy called Jeremy Parrot was adding all of our friends from school and saying, oh, come to my and he was acting like how he was gay and like trying to act like a paedophile."
> Interviewer: "He wasn't actually a paedophile?"
> Bahri: "No, he wasn't actually. He was an old student. He was putting pictures and stuff and it was like trying to...and, oh, we'll do this together, we'll do that. And we reported him and he got banned. He added like all of us."

>Interviewer: "But how did you figure out that this one was actually a fake person?"
>
>Bahri: "When I started talking to him."
>
>Interviewer: "And then what did he start saying?"
>
>Bahri: "Gay sex."

Reception theory reminds us that 'a text may conceivably contradict our preconceptions to such a degree that it calls forth drastic reactions such as throwing a book away' (Iser et al, 1980, p8). Consider the experiences of Alison, a very quiet 14-year-old girl from a Jamaican family, violent with her classmates, clearly upset with something that she has encountered on Facebook. She decides to 'switch off'.

>Alison: "What do you think of young people going on Facebook all the time. You are researching it, tell me…."
>
>Interviewer: "I think, it's uhmm interesting, you tell me…."
>
>Alison: "It's disgusting."
>
>Interviewer: "What?"
>
>Alison: "The disgusting people, sick people on there. I don't write a word. I don't let anyone tag me. It's so disgusting, just disgusting."

Critique in interpretation

Following literacy scholars, if critical awareness means evaluations and assessment in place of faith and assumptions, are these uncritical children? In the previous section we saw how all these children identified a 'problem' online, all had their own strategies to be critical in their evaluations and practices and all had failed in their attempts to resolve these problems. Sophia, who we meet later, places all her trust in the name of Facebook; Alison decides to switch off from the text; Rishona decides on a strategy of filtering photos styles and experimenting with what she finds an interesting guessing game.

What might it mean to be critical and even resistant? Following Iser above, perhaps, resistance means the exercise of choice to say no, to turn away, to reject, refuse or simply ignore. Ideologically problematic meanings might then, as one has seen in the history of audience reception research, be rejected. But this is not always the case. Media literacy demands critique at the core of people's responsibilities – evaluating, analysing and critiquing the media. In what follows I highlight stories that speak of resisting persuasion, or accepting it, or of being syntactically and semantically critical at times, and not at other times. These are also stories that speak of scepticism and trust, sometimes, of faith in the brand or on others.

Sixteen-year-olds Cathy and Sebastian play an interesting game below – Sebastian is invited to participate in a quiz 'by Facebook' and wishes to ignore it. Cathy decides to play on for him in endless rounds of questions that lead to more questions. In the course of being drawn into the quiz, countless adverts and pop-ups are actually ignored.

>Cathy: "Yeah, look, Sebastian, take the quiz. And then it'll show you [interviewer] what it's saying about him now."

> Interviewer: "Oh, you are actually taking the quiz for him?"
>
> Cathy: "Yeah, like how many kids will you have? Two."
>
> Interviewer: "What's that mobster thing up there?"
>
> Cathy: "I don't know; that's a pop-up. They're just…they're nothing to us.
> Okay, how much do you like to sleep?"
>
> Sebastian: "A lot."
>
> Cathy: "So I love it."
>
> Sebastian: "Hurry this quiz up, pretty patient, uh, not very patient."

Indeed, there are difficulties in reading off this instance – Cathy could ignore the quiz at some other time, Sebastian might allow only a selected few to play on his behalf. But the pop-up moment shows an immersion that ignores everything else. Has the text succeeded in this instance, in drawing the reader in and keeping them drawn in? There was a range of potential paths in which Cathy might have walked, or more generally, in which one might walk in the face of persuasive textual invitations. Earlier, one of the differences explored in this project between the work and the text was that the text offers a range of perspectives and patterns. These are set in motion in the act of reading. Note, then, that these patterns do indeed exist, and presumably shape what is set in motion. Interpretative choice is finite, although a range of potential choices do exist.

Consider Anne now, who at 16, has switched off, after boredom, from a particular textual space she herself says she was "addicted to". She accepted an invitation to own a pet as part of a Facebook game, realized the strain of needing to return to the page (presumably dotted with countless adverts which benefit from multiple page visits by multiple people), and somewhere along the line, on repeating the schedule daily, Anne realized that her pet might die if she did not keep returning to 'feed' it, or take it for a 'walk'. But note how, even in letting go and saying no to what are doubtless persuasive attempts, Anne reasons, saying her pet might not really have died, that it might have been put up for adoption or:

> Anne: "Yeah, I just killed mine."
>
> Interviewer: "You killed yours?"
>
> Anne: "Yeah, or I just, um, put it up for adoption or something. I don't think
> they die, they just get sick and then they take…."
>
> Interviewer: "So what pet did you have?"
>
> Anne: "I had a panda."
>
> Interviewer: "And then?"
>
> Anne: "And then I let it go because it was irritating me, so…."
>
> Interviewer: "How was it irritating you?"
>
> Anne: "It was just popping up and it's like, I loved it [with a click], and it
> would go away."

Eleven-year-old Ryan comes with his own word, Facebookaholic, which is a 'bad' thing to be. He looks around at other users and critiques what we might call addiction, and yet he admits he cannot stop it himself.

> Ryan: "Facebookaholic is like say…. It's like say someone's got a drinking problem, an alcoholic, and they can't just, and they can't get off their drink and that, yeah, it's just like that. You can't get off. You're just stuck to Facebook. You can't [unclear]. You're just determined to stay on it."
>
> Interviewer: "And is that good or bad?"
>
> Ryan: "It's bad."
>
> Interviewer: "So, then why don't you stop it?"
>
> Ryan: "Because we can't."

Arthur is syntactically critical, not just of Farmville but of many of Facebook's games. But despite what is often a sophisticated critique – of graphics, strategies, repetitive coincidences with other games, as he provides below – he himself is what he calls 'hooked on' to it, because he says you have to "play it again and again and again". And that is because, as Cole, also 11, points out, your crops die, you lose money and you lose the game.

> Arthur: "It's a farm game. It's bad."
>
> Interviewer: "Why is it bad?"
>
> Arthur: "It's boring."
>
> Interviewer: "Why do people play it if you think it is boring?"
>
> Arthur: "I don't know. You have to play it again and again and again."
>
> Interviewer: "Why?"
>
> Cole: "Because then otherwise your crops die."
>
> Interviewer: "Oh your crops die?"
>
> Arthur: "You lose money."
>
> Interviewer: "And, then what happens? It's not real money?"
>
> Arthur: "No."
>
> Cole: "You can't buy stuff."
>
> Interviewer: "Yes, and then what happens?"
>
> Cole: "Then, you lose the game."
>
> Arthur: "And, then people can't help you with the farm."
>
> Interviewer: "By doing what?"
>
> Arthur: "By planting stuff for you."

Ignoring 'invitations' from friends who are invited to send invitations, failing which they cannot add an application, is a real task on Facebook. Some profiles show more than a hundred similar 'invites' – literally perhaps invites from the text to explore spaces you could choose not to explore. Alice, 11, checks them out before rejecting most of them. She says, "I delete all the ones which are asking to be your friend on Farmville or something. I don't really care, so I just leave it, and there's some that say like, um, or someone wants you to join this pet society thing. I might join it, but not really."

Eleven-year-old Sophia comes from a working-class family where her parents are proud of their child's expertise online, make her aware of 'bad things' that might happen on commercial sites, but do not know the interface themselves. She understands the flaws in

the space that Facebook represents, but places perhaps a worrying amount of trust in an unknown 'author', a 'they', who will resolve problems for her.

> Sophia: "There are lots of pervs online. An old man pretended to be a 16-year-old girl and then met a girl who met him on Facebook, took her to a field and killed her. But I first add the people and then get to know them and then delete them if they are not fine."
>
> Interviewer: "But why do you add someone you don't know? They'll get to know stuff from your profile by then, right?"
>
> Sophia: "No you can't write bad things on Facebook, for they have a big computer. They will cancel your account if you are rude or a perv and never let you go online again."

Sophia's faith in an unknown, but nonetheless trustworthy, author behind Facebook, is echoed in Cole's views on friends' suggestions on Facebook. The task of evaluating who these suggestions are from, what data is used for the suggestions to be made, is left unfinished as he explains how friends are suggested by a high-tech someone out there:

> Interviewer: "Who is suggesting these?"
>
> Cole: "They'll like generate your friends you have now, and if they generate, they give you random friends. If you know them, you accept them. If you don't know them, then…."
>
> Interviewer: "But, who is suggesting it?"
>
> Cole: "Facebook."
>
> Interviewer: "How do they know what to suggest?"
>
> Cole: "It's because you see everybody's profile. So, they can like say um…."
>
> Interviewer: "So, you think, let's say the stuff that you might send a message to a friend or something, that somebody else is going to see it?"
>
> Cole: "I'm not sure about that, but it's all computer, so it's all high tech and all that."

In discussing the interpretative contract I note that consistency is crucial for engagement with the text to continue. If sense cannot be made, even with the act of reading, and if consistency cannot be built, eventually the reader will leave the text. SNSs function as an umbrella genre in many senses, bringing together a diversity of sub-spaces. If sense cannot quite be made of these spaces (as we have seen earlier, when discussing intertextuality in the context of games and adverts), the act of critique might mean a dismissal and disengagement with that space in the text. Olisha, in critiquing Facebook, reveals a realistic and even limited expectation of what it can offer her. She tells me that "on Facebook you can do things, but you can't flag them and they're trying to get a lot of apps on it, but if they're not genuine, you're not going to make a difference, so I never join causes or events."

When the interface disappoints, one option is to switch off. Most have learnt similarly to not look on the right side of their screens, for that is where Facebook inserts its advertisements. Twelve-year-old Ewen puts it succinctly, "Well, I don't really look at them. I

just play these games." A different kind of strategy with regard to disappointment from the text is displayed by pre-teens Ryan and Belinda, who have entered the world of social networks only recently, with very high expectations of the text. A space for connection, when also a space for unsure stories going around about strange things happening to other children, soon becomes 'disgusting'. Critique in this case is resourced by public scripts, and there is an attempt that these children make to spread the word and resist or even prevent something bad from happening:

> Ryan: "Someone sent my mum a file. They sent a message and my mum put it all over Facebook saying that, um, this person, um, Harry White and that, um, are just adding little children and don't accept because they take.... They're downloading your pictures."
>
> Belinda: "Harry White who used to be here?"
>
> Ryan: "No, no, no, some other.... And they're downloading your kids' pictures, yeah, to sell to perverts and so to make money and it's just disgusting."
>
> Belinda: "Horrid."

So, interpretative work must fill in gaps, anticipate realistically, handle unfulfilled anticipations and devise strategies with which to resolve problems opened up by the text. This, perhaps, is the task of analysis, evaluation and critique. In the final section below, I shift the focus to a more inductive category of task – the task of collaboration.

Play, pleasure and connection in interpretation

Pleasure of collaborating on a social network comes not just from the interface, which presents a range of provisions, but largely from connecting – with the world, with known and unknown others. Strikingly, the stories that follow are not always ones of doing everything together, in a space clearly meant for people to be together, so there are those who enter Facebook just to play games, and those who cannot quite explain what the groups work towards. And more of a puzzle perhaps, but connections with the world are confusing – one child might have 10 siblings, none of whom are related to her by blood, and here, a 13-year-old is married to her classmate. Rishona below explains to me how she is not actually a mother at 13. In an interesting reversal of what was intended to be personal profile information by the text, Rishona and many of her friends have taken it to express bonds of familiarity and solidarity within a peer group:

> Rishona: "No, she's not actually my child. She's like one of my best friends so I pretend that she's...a lot of girls have this thing – and guys as well – where they have fake kids like...they wouldn't say it here but I'm...on Facebook I'm married to one of my friends; I'm married to her. And like they're not actually my siblings."
>
> Interviewer: "So why...I mean...."
>
> Rishona: "Because it's just to show like they're your friends, you know."

For an older teen, Samuel, this question of connection is more instrumental – for him, it is a contest where one person's uses of the space must outdo that of others. He tells me that, "joining on Facebook is almost like a competition, although people generally don't join a group with the idea of saving the world. They join a group with the idea of like I am that, or I was doing that, or I did grow up in the 1990s and watch Prince of Bel Air". In an interesting exchange below, light banter between 16-year-old Cathy and Sebastian, this friendly rivalry is evident as collaborative connections are contrasted to see whose Facebook space is more 'happening':

> Sebastian: "You've just got a happening Facebook."
> Cathy: "Oh. It's all right, it's not the best, but...."
> Interviewer: "Is it...? It's quite happening. It's a lot more happening than mine."
> Sebastian: "Mine's better. Yeah."
> Interviewer: "Yours is better?"
> Cathy: "Sebastian's lying."
> Sebastian: "I'm not lying. It's better 'cause I've got more people."
> Cathy: "Yeah, all right. He just looks at pictures of his girlfriend."

Samuel, Cathy, Sebastian and Rishona collaborate on Facebook and connect with a wide range of diverse others. In both cases the intended purposes of the text have perhaps not quite been followed. A family connections space has been entirely reinterpreted, creating a different version of the family, equally cohesive, less dictated by what is given and more by what network one wishes to create, with its own hierarchies – so the best friend is always the partner and close friends the siblings. In the second case, friending or joining groups has been reinterpreted to move away from a cohesive collaboration to a display of popularity and ties. In both cases, connection and collaboration were intended, and in both cases, these are doubtless achieved, but this achievement follows a different path from the intended meaning of the text, perhaps.

Collaborative connections are interestingly why families are not welcome on Facebook. Rishona corrects me, for instance, when I suggest that mothers are not welcome Facebook friends because they get to see photos and information posted by their children online, and hence get a view into their children's private lives. Rishona says parents are not welcome because of what others post on your wall, because that cannot be controlled (apparently):

> Rishona: "My friend's mum, oh, my God, it's awful, she accepted her mum – this is why you don't want to accept any family. Her mum goes to her photos every day and she finds a photo...like for example, my friend went to a party, my friend doesn't smoke at all, but there were boys that were smoking. Her mum saw the photo and she got...and the girl got branded. So it's kind of like if someone...because you can't control until you've been on Facebook that day, what people have written on your walls. So like...and my friend writes on my wall this long, not true thing,

and my mum sees it before I can delete her."

Joining causes and groups are equally interesting because in both cases the overall objective, perhaps, is achieved – a large number of potential connections under a group or cause that professes or supports something. Beneath that, it seems gaps remain. In the case of causes, misinterpretation of why one might wish to join these causes is common across the children I spoke to. A number of explanations were offered, ranging from the saving of lives to the contributions of pennies to make many millions of pounds, tinged with faith as well as scepticism. In the case of groups, some were not entirely sure why they joined a group, but interestingly enough, often the purpose in joining the group was not so much to collaborate with those on it but rather to show public solidarity for the person who had created the group. Collaboration is evident in both cases, but perhaps differently from what seems to be indicated from a surface reading of the textual space. Hence Arthur chooses to not hurt someone's feelings and hence does not ignore group invites from the person:

> Arthur: "Because there's one person who just constantly sends me files and stuff, and I don't want Farmville."
>
> Interviewer: "So, why don't you tell him?"
>
> Arthur: "You could ignore the people who send you, like, I think it's like ignore posts from this person in the application, but it's quite harsh, because if you get something good, he'll send it to you, but if not, you miss out on it. So, it's quite…."

So, it is not as if the pursuit of collaborative connections is free of ethics, care and feelings. Indeed, as Martin succinctly points out, Facebook "looks different" during school hours. "When you're ill, you often go on Facebook and there's no one there doing anything. And, then it's completely different. It's really boring". Mutual support and solidarity are central towards making Facebook look different. As 16-year-old Delia points out, "we just like make fun of each other. You just laugh for a good five hours straight. You go on there and you just laugh for the whole five hours. And, it can take your trouble away". And yet, note this discussion between Cathy and Sebastian on another girl named Cathy from their Year group, who is excluded and indeed not treated very nicely in wall conversations between her friends:

> Interviewer: "That's another Cathy?"
>
> Sebastian: "Yes."
>
> Cathy: "Yeah, she's fat."
>
> Interviewer: "Oh!"
>
> Cathy: "Sorry, I don't like her. And she's got red hair."
>
> Sebastian: "Yeah, red hair."

Cole explains to me the purposes of a large group – the British Heart Foundation – where he is convinced that the person who started the group (any group) would save the lives of many, as promised. He is connected, committed and engaged, he expects something perhaps even didactic out of the text, and in his faith that these expectations are going to be fulfilled, has not quite worked out how to evaluate what he joins or commits to:

Cole: **"**You click that, like you can join this group and each person you join will give something to charity, like that."

Interviewer: "So, how does it work, do you think?"

Cole: "Sorry, on the British Heart Foundation, you start a cause, and if you get one million people or 1,000 people or something."

Interviewer: "Say a million people join, and then?"

Cole: "They'll probably save 1,000 people's lives."

Interviewer: "Who is they?"

Cole: "The people who started it."

Interviewer: "Who started the group?"

Cole: "Yes."

As I indicated earlier, joining groups is often an extension of support and solidarity for the person creating the group rather than a commitment towards a shared cause alone. Kelly explains to me that she joins most of her groups as an extension of support more than anything else:

Kelly: "One of my friends is addicted to making, so I…she just makes them, so I'm like okay, I'll accept."

Interviewer: "Groups about what?"

Kelly: "Um, like everything, like…."

Bob: "There's one about the smell of gasoline."

Kelly: "So like, you know, Roy Daniels of X Factor? Something like 50 requests for a group about him so I was like, oh, okay then, yeah."

The (problematic?) language of texts and readers

In this paper, I have used the language of texts and readers when analysing interviews with users of SNSs. This is unsatisfactory at a number of levels. First, the metaphor of the text conjures the image of a singular text, written and archived in some kind of stability, which the reader is then free to interpret, in a range of ways. Decades of research with audiences of mass-mediated print and broadcast media have used the metaphor of the text to analyse programmes, tapes or records which have been reviewed repeatedly by textual analysts to look for strategies of representation, modes of address and discursive tropes. Considerable difficulty arises, however, every time one refers to 'the text' for SNSs, or many other Web 2.0 genres for instance, because the text here is in eternal flux, changing with user-generated content every moment. Indeed, as Juul draws o our attention, in the context of interactive (online) games in particular – "The relation between the reader/viewer and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world" (Juul, 2001: 1; see also Aarseth, 1997) The metaphor of the text has a problem at another level, which is in terms of research. The tendency in much of audience reception studies to provide an analysis of the text somehow establishes the text (in fact, the researcher's own interpretation of the text, and its potential gaps and possibilities) as the singular text 'out there', which the audience shall now comprehend and/or interpret. In this project, by

avoiding this step – of providing an account of the text, as if it were the pre-requisite of understanding interpretative work – I have tried, albeit in a less than satisfactory way, to escape the problem of the singular text. In analysing interpretation, though, note that I have drawn attention to gaps and inconsistencies or puzzles and road blocks which have been indicated by users themselves.

The third problem with the metaphor of the text is not so much a problem of the metaphor itself but the tools around it that have been at the heart of audience reception studies, and have, in turn, been mobilized for this project. Some of these tools were developed addressing fiction. There is an argument to be made, that importing them into the analysis of non-narrative and indeed non-fictional texts might prove to be a difficult or even unnecessary endeavour – note for instance the growth of 'ludology', an entire sub-field (see for e.g. Frasca, 2003). Finally, the metaphor of the text automatically assumes the parallel metaphors of author and reader. I shall come to the problems with the reading metaphor shortly, but the problems with 'author' in Web 2.0 are immediately evident when much content is generated by users in a networked, often anonymous, and almost always collaborative and heterarchical way. So four problems seem prominent with the metaphor of the text in the context of interactive Web 2.0 – the instability of Web 2.0 texts, the dangers of establishing a singular text with its singular textual analysis, waiting to be mis/interpreted by those who engage with them, the inefficiency of analytical tools designed for fictional and narrative texts, and the complexities of the attendant notion of author.

The problems associated with reading/reader too are considerable. First, and at the simplest level, reading cannot account for a whole range of activities one performs in using the media, but perhaps, in audience reception studies, in extending reading as a critical, engaged, interpretative task (note the quote from Iser earlier in this paper), we have successfully extended reading to mean the combination of viewing, reading, listening, using and so on. Reading also implies that there is a text to be read, as does the term literacy. The co-creation of texts, and the creation of texts in the very act of reading itself is perhaps not quite grasped within the theoretical repertoires associated with reading as imagined in the conceptual framework mobilized for this project. For many, reading implies a certain passivity, where the act of physically altering texts is not implied, and without this, the entire range of activities in the Web 2.0 world is impossible to theorize. And then, with the text-reader metaphor (although one must doubt if this is a flaw that has anything to do with the metaphor itself, or whether this has something to do with the way the metaphor has largely been used), there is the problem of the limitless polysemy of texts and the concurrent undermining of textual power.

These problems were all encountered in the course of this project, and call for reflection. In arguing for retention of the text-reader metaphor, without a substantial extension of the metaphor to be able to conceptually accommodate the task of creation, there is little value in carrying it forward for empirical analysis of use in interactive environments. This task of extension and revision is clear. We need a way in which to be

able to retain the substantial theoretical (and by extension methodological) merit in reader-oriented theories of meaning, and this retention is only feasible once we have refined and extended these theoretical resources, as indicated in this paper. This brings me to reflect on why this retention and the language of texts and readers has been useful, not only in the discussion of empirical work in this project, but also, why the text-reader metaphor is of significance for making sense of engagement with the interactive world. First, the metaphor implies a relationship of mutuality, which is not only inherent in the very notion of reception but also in that of use and literacies, where use automatically implies the existence of something to be used, with its set of affordances (Hutchby, 2001), norms and conventions, with an implied reader (cf. Woolgar, 1991) often established. In my analysis of interviews with children we saw how these conventions are sometimes exclusive, how they can be transgressed, even if only symbolically (consider the case of listing friends as family), how they could be compared (note how different versions of the genre are compared and contrasted), how they are anticipated (the diverging expectations of Facebook and Myspace), and how the norms of the interface are used strategically. The metaphor thus accommodates a set of conditions, which are doubtless inherent in the interface itself, which, if it were to be abandoned in the name of celebrating user-generated content, would also take away the resource with which to spot these very areas of mutuality in use. As a methodological observation, the metaphor provided a smooth translation, if one will, of the conceptual priorities of audience reception studies into the social world where interactive interfaces are being used. Texts and readers operate within contexts, the metaphor demands a recognition of what is permitted by the interface, it helps us grasp a range of activities that struggle within and against these permissions, that sometimes transgress and break free of imaginable actions and that create meaning in ways that are neither reducible to individual whims nor generalizable on strictly demographic parameters.

Conclusions

In this paper, I followed four strands of tasks involved in interpretation – in a mix of deductive and inductive reasoning. I selected stories from extreme instances of performing or not performing these tasks, or indeed, performing them differently. The richness of intertextual readings displayed a weaving genres and micro spaces within genres into intriguing narratives of similarities and differences. Tackling negative spaces as interruptions in what could otherwise be a smooth experience of the text reveals divergent strategies in coping with these interruptions. Critique and resistance threw up a variety of potential definitions and only sometimes, are they satisfactorily performed perhaps. Collaboration involves different purposes from intended ones and the end products of collaborative engagement often indicates little about what went behind it in the first place. In the end, the task with this paper, was to take apart the precise, although far from exhaustive, aspects of interpretive work involved in being 'digitally literate' outlining also how texts and contexts shape the varying degrees of 'expertise' with which these tasks are performed.

This above can be concluded in a variety of potentially valuable ways, framed either around children's expertise and experiences or around the conceptual repertoire this study seeks to understand. Three conclusions seem relevant. First, inherited concepts, text and interpretation have been used in this paper to make sense of children interpreting social networking sites. As entry points they seem to have proved fruitful. With the repertoire of anticipations, expectations, interruptions and intertextuality one is able to sufficiently highlight the centrality of the media itself – Kelly's 'Facebook streets' perhaps, but also indicate the nature of tasks involved in being a literate navigator or one who stumbles. Second, inherited priorities from audience reception research which connect clearly to the conversation on media and digital literacies, prove to be important by connecting resistance for instance and the broader task of critique to the demands of being analytical, evaluative and critical users of new media. Third, the notion of interpretation, and by extension, literacies as work, is useful overall, for there is a range of tasks involved in making sense of new media. The horizon of tasks I identified in this paper, by no means exhaustive, and in many senses theory-led make us begin to identify significant parallels between such work for mass media (cf. Liebes and Katz, 1993), but also the range of tasks involved in living a digital everyday life.

Biographical note:

Ranjana Das is Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at the University of Leicester. She was a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Luneburg in Germany between May 2011 and March 2012 and completed her PhD at the London School of Economics in 2011. Her interests are primarily in media audience reception studies as it links with philosophical hermeneutics, media literacies, and media genres. Contact: rd207@le.ac.uk.

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[2] Of the 60 children interviewed, half were girls and half boys, each of the four age groups had around a fourth of the total sample in them, a little less than a fifth came from non-white ethnic backgrounds, and there was a very wide range of socio-economic categories, with the most children coming from homes that fell under the last four of the five class version of the UK National Statistics classification. All children went to schools in Greater London. Details of the sample divided by age, SES, gender and ethnicity are available on request. Children were interviewed in pairs, at school,

during ICT lessons, but away from the classroom in an empty and quiet space.W/NW refers to White/Non-white. Interviewees' names have been anonymised.