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Everyday Childhoods: Time, Technology and Documentation

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FIGURE 1.1 Lucien’s Lego camper van
I ask Lucien to show me something that is more about his past and he takes me upstairs to the room that he and his sister share. Bright colours, fabric, stuff. A beautiful space. He puts onto the spotted bed a camper van made out of Lego. He still plays with Lego, but less than in the past. It used to be his big thing. He made things with his dad. He evaluates the camper van as a car (good quality but slow) rather than as a piece of construction kit.

Lucien plays with the van, shows how the interior works, the faults in the design. While in his room, we talk about play. If his friends come over, they tend to play in his room. He explains that he is not the kind of boy that plays online. He is ‘calm and quiet’. His mum doesn’t like him spending time on his PlayStation and he doesn’t understand why. His mum thinks that his dad becomes a kid when he plays on it. Lucien wants to stay a child, he is in no hurry to grow up. He likes to play. But adults also have freedom. They are allowed to go fast. He maps his life so far in terms of speed: starting with buses, moving on to trains and now cars. He expects that next time I see him, he will be into jet fighters. I check whether this is all linked to future careers? No, it’s about now. He wants to stay a kid. [Researcher field note, RT]

We begin this book with an extract from a research field note written after a visit with 7-year-old Lucien. The researcher has known Lucien since before he was born, having collaborated with his mother Monica in a study of new motherhood in 2005. Over 12 months, our research followed Lucien between home and school, and shared in his excitement in discovering online search and the computer game Minecraft. Like many parents, Monica expressed concerns about Lucien’s ‘screen time’ and the complicated tangle of educational, social and hedonistic dimensions of digital culture. At the same time, Lucien observed and questioned the boundaries his parents made. Through our research, we observed how Lucien’s experiences at home and school shaped his discovery and engagement with technology in his everyday life.

Researching Everyday Childhoods: Time, Technology and Documentation in a Digital Age is a book that explores the role of research in understanding children’s lives in a digital age, and the opportunities and challenges this
Everyday Childhoods is also the title of a collection of material held in digital form at the Mass Observation Archive. It was made possible by two publicly funded research initiatives that combine methodological and substantive aims (see Appendix 1 for the story of the study). The book explores the dataset, reflects on the methods used to generate it and the insights that arise from thinking with and through it. As a group of researchers, our experience spans the analogue and digital transition, and we are attuned to how recalibrations can be felt in the settings and practices of children’s lives. Our endeavour expresses something of the spirit of the age, where researching and curating have become popular practices and where we are challenged to find ways of speaking across the many and ephemeral publics enabled by digital methods. We have attempted to work with the affordances of digital data and methods in order to create a text that is scholarly and analytical, yet which allows the reader to navigate the material on their own terms in conjunction with the archive to which it is so closely connected. For example, if you want to see Lucien’s bedroom and hear his own words, you can look at the multimedia animations that are part of this project. The images and the audio provide access to the texture of Lucien’s everyday life with an immediacy that text alone does not; however, making meaning of and from such documents is a longer, slower and often painstaking task. In this opening chapter, we outline some of the key ideas guiding the interpretations we present in this book, including the idea of the ‘everyday’ in a digital age, and themes of time, technology and documentation, which provide a focus for our analysis.

Childhood and digital culture

A decade ago our first multiple-signatory ‘toxic childhood’ press letter described how children’s health and wellbeing were being undermined by the decline of outdoor play, increasingly screen-based lifestyles, a hyper-competitive schooling system and the unremitting commercialisation of childhood. Despite widespread public concern, subsequent policymaking has been half-hearted, short-termist and disjointedly ineffective.

[extract from multiple signed letter to the Guardian newspaper 25 Dec. 2015]

1See http://modernmothers.org/favs/L/Lucien.html.
These two extracts come from a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper and a blogged response to that letter. The first is signed by leading UK child psychologists and educationalists and captures how technology has become a focus of concern in relation to child wellbeing, suggesting a causal connection with a range of trends, including rising obesity and declining mental health. Concerned for the future, the commentators look back to past, ‘healthier’ and outdoor childhoods. The second extract is a critical response to this letter, produced by researchers working in the field of autism, who observe how children’s lives can be positively transformed by technology. Challenging the blanket notion of technology’s ‘toxicity’ for childhood, they call for greater ‘nuance’ and ‘detail’ in accounts of how children engage and live with digital technologies. These extracts each provide important insights into contemporary debates about children’s lives in a digital age within the UK: first, that discussions about children and digital technology have become highly politicized and are routinely contested within the public sphere; second, that these discussions are experienced and responded to by parents and children; and finally, that research can play a vital mediating role in documenting children’s everyday experiences in and of a digital world.

Children are the focus of much of the public debate on the impact of digital culture, with anxiety clustering around physical passivity, brain development, sociality, privacy and risk (see Buckingham 2011 for an overview). The speed of technological innovation results in uncomfortable lags and snags between adult claims to authority and the uneven expertise of the young – who are the most intensive users of new media and who can be understood to power much of its content and circulation (Livingstone & Haddon 2009). Moral panics about digital childhoods, grounded or not, become part of a fabric of everyday parenting, schooling and play. Public anxieties about children’s digital culture
are international in scope – even though children’s digital media practices vary across cultural settings (Miller et al. 2016), as do the concerns to which they give rise (Livingstone and Third, 2017). Our study seeks to develop a methodological perspective that is attentive to, and grounded within, the everyday contexts of children’s lives and digital practices. Through a focus on ‘the everyday’ in a UK context we propose a methodological and theoretical framework that can provide a nuanced perspective on children’s lives across a range of local-global contexts. Our approach to thinking about the everyday is inspired by a range of intellectual resources that includes both material worlds and the stories we tell about them. The rediscovery of the ‘everyday’ appears to mark a new interest in the empirical world as a starting point for the generation of theory (Neal & Murji 2015), characterized by a focus on ‘moments’ (Gabb & Fink 2015), objects (Rinkinen et al. 2015) and specificity (Back 2015). Our approach is particularly indebted to anthropological (Pink 2012) and interactionist (Scott 2009) traditions that focus on the material and phenomenal as the ‘stuff’ through which soci-ality and structure are enacted. A focus on the everyday also draws attention to temporality and processes of continuity and rupture though which certain practices travel and others disappear. Duration is one of the main ways that we classify the everyday, tracing the micro-temporalities of the ‘craze’, through the meso-temporalities of the ‘experience’, through to the macro-temporalities that underpin habits, routines, demeanours and collective formations such as curricula and traditions.2

Documentation also plays a vital mediating role in our experience of time and is a key component of contemporary governance, be it self-administered or institutionally driven. Within childhood studies, it has been argued that there has been an explosion in ‘documentalization’ of childhood, with growth charts, progression logs and various kinds of portfolios entering streams of interaction, shaping personal and professional practice (Alasuutari & Kelle 2015). Documents give rise to predictive logics that shape as well as reflect behaviour; in Lindsay Prior’s terms, documents do things as well as contain things.3 In this project, we are interested in the documentation of childhood in its widest sense: the formal reporting documents created by teachers and social workers, the informal documents created by children and parents (e.g. family albums), the documents and objects that span the home-school-leisure divide. We also recognize ourselves as part of a post-empirical moment within the social sciences, where the documents created with and by researchers (such as field notes) must also be understood as a part of a wider culture of documentation demanding the same kinds of interrogation (Lury & Adkins 2009).

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3See Prior (2008); Alasuusari & Kelle (2015); Williamson (2016).
Documentation has also been digitalized. Writing, photography and film each in its time constituted a revolution in documentation, and their democratization over the twentieth century (accelerated by digital methods) shapes how memory is externalized and organized. As the means to document become available to more of us, the structures of feeling that shape our expectations adapt. Roland Barthes’s (1981) analysis of ‘punctum’ – the emotional arrow that connects him and his mother through a single treasured photograph – speaks of a particular moment in the history of the media. Its present-day equivalent might be one of the many ‘time-lapse’ films now on YouTube that animate a child’s maturation from birth to adulthood or condense years’ worth of thousands of ‘a photo a day’ images into a matter of minutes.

From the earliest days of social media, commentators have noted how new opportunities for documentation are associated with unfamiliar temporalities that give rise to new kinds of awkwardness, embarrassment and exposure. A series of moral panics around ‘happy slapping’ (using the mobile phone to record and display physical assaults), ‘fraping’ (having one’s online identity taken), ‘sexting’ and ‘revenge porn’ (sharing and potentially losing control of explicit material) warn of the new kinds of risk associated with the documenting and publishing of self. Each is associated with a temporal lag – and a failure of empathy – expanding the space between a trusting relationship and the moment of regret and humiliation. Commentators have drawn attention to the importance of non-synchronicity as an important characteristic of cyberbullying, as well as the problem of indelibility, as digital footprints created in the moment accumulate over time, challenging our ability to forget or be forgotten, or simply to shape and reshape our story. As quickly as new technologies of display appear to solve these problems (such as Snapchat, which disappears after a few seconds), so too do technologies of capture (the screenshot) evolve to foil them.

While the risks of personal exposure associated with social media have generated much public concern, there is also growing interest in how the aggregation of self-documentation makes personal privacy vulnerable in new ways. Alice Marwick (2013) has coined the term attention economy to characterize teenage social media use, usefully alerting us to the complexity of real and imagined audiences associated with the kinds of documentary practice that appear to be at the centre of young people’s culture. Also useful is danah boyd’s (2014) idea of context collapse, which refers to how the public nature of social media cuts across the moral communities that shape young people’s

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5 For non-synchronicity, see Kofoed (2014). For indelibility see Mayer-Schönberger (2009); Kofoed & Larsen (2016).
worlds (relationships with friends, parents, teachers/professionals, strangers and acquaintances). The affective power of social media appears to be rooted in the dynamic collisions it can create between concrete local embodied relationships and more mediated relationships online.

We are interested in the ethical hotspots encountered by children, young people and teenagers as they engage in the documentation of everyday life in what Jodi Dean calls an era of communicative capitalism (Dean 2005). By focusing on ordinarily awkward moments as well as more spectacular exposures, we aim to generate tools and methods that may prove useful to others. In Chapter 4, we propose a model of teenage social media use that maps an imperative to participate against an imperative of in/visibility. Social media constitutes a universe in which value is generated by participation and the circulation of content. Such participation may be relatively passive, lurking and liking, or it may be much more active and extend into the creation of content. Once content is created, the question is whether content is controlled and who reaps the reward of the value embedded within it. In the case of sexting for example, the victim loses control of her image and the value is assumed by and between the persons who circulate the image and whose reputations are enhanced by this. However, it is possible to use oneself as content and to gain some of the value that accrues from your audience’s attention as the YouTube celebrities demonstrate. There are also less visible forms of participation associated with content creation that are both high status and involve some control over self-image.

Description, as Claudia Castañeda has noted, is a form of ontological politics; it makes a claim to the real (Castañeda 2002: 142). Some of the language we have already used indicates how acutely any attempt to describe children’s lives is caught up in such politics. Are we dealing with gaming, friendship and flirting, or addiction, bullying, sexting and porn culture, for example? Our very vocabularies can pathologize, objectify or depoliticize. We recognize how the figure of the child can operate within popular and public culture, mobilized in reactionary ways to secure an idealized and normative future. In this respect, we embrace the queering of childhood studies and the disentangling of notions of development and growth from ideas of becoming and experimentation (Stockton 2009). Any engagement with children’s culture is caught within what David Oswell (2013) describes as a double paradigm, in which we are preoccupied by portraying the child as having agency while at the same time understanding that child as caught within a compelling nexus of material and social relations. The approach we have taken in this project does not resolve this tension, but works with a post-empirical but materialist

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7See Ringrose et al. (2013).
orientation to recognize intra-action (Barad 2007) between bodies, identities and material/cultural resources, showing what young people do with these resources and what these materials might do to them, without slipping into a moralizing register. The task is to navigate a path through a contemporary landscape in which cultures are – often highly self-consciously – mediated by class and other social differences. Our methods as well as our theoretical and ethical orientations incline us away from the spectacular (the explicit or idealized images shared on Snapchat and Instagram respectively, for example), or the isolated focus on single products (such as push-up bras for tween girls), towards the creative and often unpredictable improvisations of children’s everyday lives in context, in order to emphasize complexity and contingency.

**Concepts for a post-digital age**

From school whiteboards and tablets to portable game consoles and home televisions, the screen has become a ubiquitous presence in children’s everyday spaces and routines. From the outset, the social and moral functions of screens became a focus of our research. As screen technologies have changed, so do the battle lines of fighting over the remote control, sharing devices, negotiating ‘screen time’, managing the presence of multiple screens, and extending the boundaries of the personal through mobile media that enable us to manipulate our sense of intimacy through sound and vision. As we describe in Chapter 2, the proliferation of screens also shaped our research methodology – prompting choices in our use of mobile devices and the representation of the documents captured by these devices back to participants, forming the basis of a highly layered, reflexive and mediated data set.

Though the term ‘screen’ is largely identified with electronic media, it also has meaning that is older and broader – referring both to acts of obfuscation (to hide or protect) and presentation (to display or show). These definitions also proved highly pertinent to our study, enabling us to imagine the screen as both a noun (‘the screen’ as a surface) and as a verb referring to acts of ‘screening’. This helped us to interrogate and move beyond assumptions that young people overshare by ‘broadcasting’ their lives on social media or become socially isolated and awkward by ‘hiding behind screens’.

Instead, we looked at the ways that screens enable both display and concealment – for example, by sharing photographs taken with friends and family or using a pseudonym whilst publishing fanfiction. Screens also facilitate both connection and disconnection – such as when ‘sonic bridges’ are forged with friends over Skype whilst playing Minecraft or when the world is

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8 In ‘Alone Together’ (2011), Sherry Turkle claims that digital media provide only an illusion of togetherness and companionship and instead have created greater social disconnection and isolation.
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blocked out listening alone to a favourite playlist through a set of headphones. We suggest that the idea of the screen – in all its complexity and ambiguity – helps us to think about young people’s lives with flexible affordances of filtering, blocking, distracting, focusing and projecting all potentially in play. The idea of the screen inevitably brings with it questions of audience, reception, public and private, and these themes are elaborated on throughout this book.

The study design on which we draw is both qualitative and longitudinal, capturing both the fast-moving business of discovering and enjoying new toys or crazes, and the slower-moving aspects of changing bodies, changing family formation, moving house and school. It involves two groups of young people: one group of 7/8-year-olds whom researchers have followed since birth and a newly recruited group of teenagers whom we followed over a year. We characterize these as our ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ panels respectively, a shorthand for the timespans that we access through their participation in the research. Yet this distinction goes beyond our research design, connecting with an analytic vocabulary for understanding how children may be caught up in a digital economy. Here, we draw on the writings of Scott Lash (2010), who uses the distinction to think about how value is created and circulated in a digitally saturated culture. Lash points to brands as an example of how value is generated by ‘intensive’ acts of creativity and meaning making which are then circulated via extensive systems (e.g. social media channels) which homogenize what was once unique. We can illustrate this idea by looking at ecologies of social media that rely on the creation and circulation of user-generated content. Children and teenagers not only generate much of the content of platforms such as YouTube, but they also power its circulation and the advertising that relies on this.

The language of extensity and intensity can also help us navigate the contours of academic literature on children’s digital cultures, which tends to fall into two camps. On one side, we find an alertness to the spectre of ‘creeping connectivity’ and a concern with how digitization operates as a mode of governance, often in the form of metrics which in turn drive action. This concern with the extensive dimensions of digital childhood can be found in research on the data-driven school that produces children as data subjects. On the other hand, there is a body of work that encourages us to follow the volatile traces of digital practices and the affective qualities of digital temporalities that shape teenage sociality. A vocabulary of intensity helps us to tune into moments and practices that are affectively thick and redolent with potential, while a vocabulary of extensity alerts us to practices, connections and classifications

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9 For example, see Beer (2016); Finn (2016); Lupton & Williamson (2017).
10 For example, see Staunæs & Kofoed (2015); Harvey & Ringrose (2015); Davies (2015).
that connect us to larger grids and systems of meaning. In our analyses, we notice both these aspects of digital culture as well as their entanglements in the everyday lives of children and young people.

Lash argues that today’s global informational culture is characterized by coming together of intensive and extensive systems with a ‘substance becoming system’ and the emergence of ‘intensive materialities’ (2010: 69). Digital culture is no longer contained by screens, it saturates all aspects of everyday life and increasingly will be embedded in the everyday through the internet of things. One way of capturing this has been through the concept of the post-digital, which moves our attention away from technology, the screen and representations towards new forms of life and environment.11 Madianou and Miller (2012) use the concept of ‘polymedia’ to capture how everyday life has become saturated by the multiplication of screens and media platforms. They argue that in a polymedia culture, the choice of medium for interpersonal communications is no longer determined by location or cost, but by ‘the implications . . . for personal and moral responsibility’ (2012: 171). These are ideas that move us away from questions of access and the language of ‘media poor and rich’ or ‘natives and immigrants’, in order to imagine a near future where unlimited WIFI connections and a multiplicity of devices enable constant connection and the emergence of a range of practices that assume contactability and co-presence through a digital leash.

Polymedia and post-digitality are provocative ideas rather than empirical realities, with access and uptake continuing to be uneven and shaped by both national infrastructure and parenting culture.12 While most of the younger children in this study had some access to digital devices, their social and play worlds were predominantly embodied and face to face. The teenagers, however did enjoy the kinds of privacy and separation that online forms of communication provided, as well as engaging with the kinds of research potential made available by digital search facilities. For this generation, something happens between 7 and 13, and our longitudinal design allowed us to capture how these new spaces and possibilities were encountered. Timing matters, and the pegging of ‘development’ to technology is highly contingent. Family interviews revealed the perceived inequities experienced by siblings complaining that rules for an eldest child had become less lenient when others reached the same age. Birthdays and other gift-giving festivals often heralded

11 See Berry & Dieter (2015).
12 The EU Kids Online project, which carried out survey research with 25,000 children across 25 European countries, found that the opportunities and risks of children’s technology use were dependent on factors ranging from existing national infrastructures (e.g. availability of broadband), curricula in schools (e.g. ICT and e-safety) and parenting styles/relationships (see Livingstone & Haddon 2009).
a new stage of life; old forms of sociality became redundant as new devices irrevocably changed the cultural landscape for individuals and families.

Starting with the archive

We are living in an age of ‘archival proximity’, where easy access to vast digital archives transform our relationship with knowledge and the past. Within both popular and academic culture, this is associated with a ‘turn to time’, including ‘retro-mania’ and a new enthusiasm for archival practices, methods and ethics. In this project, we have started rather than ended with the archive, collaborating with young people and their families to create public documents of their everyday lives. We have also invited them into the archive to see how their data is stored and to imagine future users and audiences. Together, we are involved in what Noortje Marres (2012) calls ‘redistributed’ networks of knowledge production that in our case involves funders, participants, their families, researchers, archivists, readers and secondary users. This book attempts to make all these stakeholders visible. Our aim has been to create a text that works as a stand-alone volume, yet which operates in connection and conversation with the Everyday Childhoods archive. The digital dataset has two forms: the open access multimedia case studies that were compiled, edited and published online in collaboration with our participants and the full data set which is deposited at the Mass Observation Archive, both in an anonymized format (available on request) and in a non-anonymized form, embargoed for future use. By exploring the potentialities of the e-book form, we have been able to integrate some multimedia into the text, yet are aware of the problems that this may produce in terms of functionality and potential obsolescence linked to the propriety formats within which the material is presented.

In thinking about how the material for this project is mediated, we have worked with ideas of raw and cooked data as a continuum. Raw data refers to documents in their most basic state. For us, this involves audio recordings, visual records and field notes – all of which we have endeavoured to capture in the highest quality formats that are less vulnerable to decay or obsolescence. This is the data that cannot and arguably should not be anonymized, access to which is restricted to the primary research team until the expiry of an embargo. To be ‘raw’ does not mean that this data is ‘naturally occurring’ – interviews

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14 The multimedia case studies and other materials can be accessed on the project’s website: http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/everydaychildhoods.
and research encounters are complicated and staged interactions that demand deconstruction in their own right. The terminology of ‘cooking’ refers to the process through which documents are selected, compiled and edited into larger wholes. So, for example, the multimedia case studies are ‘cooked’, meaning that they are synthetic texts created with and through content management software (such as Prezi) to present one particular ‘story’ from the ‘archive’ of material on which they draw. These ‘cooked’ texts fix material in a moment in time, revealing the tools available to researchers, the wider genres on which they draw and the preoccupations that shape academic agendas.

In self-consciously creating a data set for posterity, we have paid particular attention to the lessons emerging from the secondary analysis of archived data sets: for example, that the researcher is a key part of the data set and that future researchers are likely to read the archive in very different ways than the original research team. In Chapter 9, Jette Kofoed with Rachel Thomson, a member of the project advisor panel, engages with some of the Everyday Childhoods material as a secondary analyst to demonstrate some of the challenges this can entail.

In writing this book, we are attempting to negotiate several tasks and a complicated timeline – speaking to contemporaneous audiences about children’s everyday cultures and engaging with emergent debates about digital methods for social research, while also imagining the afterlife of this project as a historical resource for future researchers. In extending our imagination in this way, we – like teenagers concerned (or warned) that their social media activity might intervene in a future job interview – are vaguely aware of future audiences, our senses heightened by a sense of the difference that time makes to the relationship between context and object/subject.

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15 The distinction between the raw (natural) and cooked (cultural) is taken from the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (1969), and was taken up within digital history by Daniel Cohen (2004) to distinguish between the raw ‘documents, information and communications that are heterogeneous and that have little, if any, organization’ and cooked ‘digital history takes such historical materials and adds helpful markings and a measure of homogeneity’ (2004: 337). We encountered this idea through the work of historian Lucy Robinson in discussion of the digital learning resource ‘Observing the 80s’ https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/observingthe80s/. The distinction between raw and cooked as an aspect of digital data is subject to vociferous debate in that it can hide the post-structural insight that the raw is always already cooked (see, e.g., Gitelman (2013).

16 For revisiting studies, see Burroway (2003); Savage (2011); Salmon and Reissman (2008). For discussions of the ethics arising from this, see Mauthner (2012); Gillies & Edwards (2012); Crow, G. (2012); Morrow et al. (2014).

17 For discussion of the practices of recontextualization that is part of the historical method and how this is a site of tension between historical and sociological epistemologies, see Niamh Moore (2006).
The book is made up of a series of chapters that are inspired by the data-set, and which make original contributions to a series of substantive themes in the study of children's cultures as well as demonstrating methodological innovation. There is no neat demarcation between methodology and findings in this project. We are attuned to what our methods allow us to see – maintaining this reflexivity and specificity in the way we present our insights. The chapters are also polyvocal, reflecting the insights and interests of the broad research team involved in this project. Individual researchers write in their own name, focusing attention on a particular analysis that they have made of the data set or reflecting on a concept or theme on which the project sheds light. Chapters also take different formats, including conversations between collaborators and more discursive analyses in which data and interpretation are integrated. Our vision for this project is that the Everyday Childhoods archive can operate as a platform around which a community of interpretation can form and develop. In making the data set open and transparent in the way we have, we invite others to interrogate the material and to contribute to methodological and conceptual debate. While the book is a highly resilient, flexible and enduring form, it tends not to invite collaboration, interaction or debate. We encourage readers to explore the full range of multimedia case studies that sit alongside the book and to access the data set themselves – either as a resource for teaching or secondary analysis – and to contribute themselves to the Everyday Childhoods collection. The book that follows offers a new direction for childhood studies in the twenty-first century, making sense of how children are at the heart of new ways of living and researching. It makes its claims based on a unique and significant data set and an exceptional body of methodological and conceptual development. While the moment at which we have captured children's cultures will soon pass, we hope that the ideas and approaches forged in this book will have an enduring relevance for the field.