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## Behind the high-tech fetish: children, work and media use across classes in India

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**Behind the high-tech fetish: Children, work and media use across classes in India****Shakuntala Banaji, LSE****Abstract**

*A dearth of media might seem idyllic to urban parents tired of being pestered for an ipad or the latest game. But given the increasing focus amongst Western scholars and educators on theorising digital media as a conduit to conviviality, creativity and civic participation, insights can be gained from the lives and narratives of media-rich and media-deprived children in areas of the global south. Using original observations and in-depth qualitative interviews with rural and urban Indian children aged 9-17, this paper discusses the media, work, learning and anxieties they face in everyday life. These data are analysed drawing on frameworks developed to understand child work and children's agency in the fields of critical sociology and anthropology. Findings suggest the need for a revised analysis of media use and cultural meaning in middle and low income contexts as strongly inflected by children's social class, their responsibilities, labour, contextual knowledge and embeddedness in diverse non-mediated communities.*

**Keywords:** childhood, global south, media use, India, child labour, children's agency, ethnocentrism

## Introduction

Do most contemporary children inhabit a digital world? When it comes to children in diverse contexts in the global south, how should discussions of media, and of digital media in particular, inflect the priorities of development journalists, teachers, media educators, developers and academics? Indeed, how can we understand and theorise the meanings of media, the digital, school and work in the experiences, routines, relationships and everyday lives of a cross-section of Indian children and, by extrapolation, the lives of children across the global south? This paper argues that for any media agenda for children to be plausibly ‘global’ it needs to be founded upon a detailed and reflexive understanding of the vastly differing contexts, experiences, constraints and agencies of children across the global south. While moral panics about children’s addiction to screen media, or vulnerability to online predators are commonplace in the Western press<sup>1</sup> and academia (cf. Levin & Kilbourne 2008; Papadopolous 2010; and discussed at length in Cassell & Cramer 2008; and Potter & Potter 2001), the lives of children with little media access or representation are sparsely discussed and generally theorised uncritically with reference to an assumed (Western) media-saturated norm. When the lives of children with scant media access do find their way into policy documents and reports, the meanings and significance of media and communications in the lives of global south children are often assumed rather than demonstrated. *ICT in Education*, a report from 2013 by the Earth Institute Columbia University (plus other Connect to Learn partners, funded by mobile giant Ericsson), opens with the statements: ‘Mobile broadband has fundamentally changed the way we live our lives. The potential to revolutionize the field of education is just beginning’. On the report’s cover, smiling African children wear school uniforms. An anecdote from the opening section underlines this key message about the transforming power of mobile broadband:

As the girls eagerly introduced themselves ... the Education Coordinator took a moment to ask the girls a series of questions illustrating for the researchers the world these girls knew...

“How many of you have ever been on a paved road?”

“How many of you have ever watched a television?”

“How many of you have ever been to Mbarara (the nearest town 40km away from where the researchers had travelled that very morning)?”

For each of these kinds of questions, no more than two or three girls in a room of 100 raised their hands in affirmation. (Bartlett et al., 2013:1).

Following this anecdote we read, ‘Without access to the internet and the world of information and resources available online, these girls would have scarcely a chance to know the vast world of possibilities beyond the remote, mountainous communities where they live’. The assumption that ‘the vast world of possibilities’ on the internet is meaningful to these girls and that merely connecting their school will allow access remains unquestioned. Yet it is broadly in keeping with the ICT-related rhetoric emerging from institutions in wealthy communities and this excerpt exemplifies the approach to education and technology in the global south emerging from partnerships between corporations and universities (see also Mitra et al., 2005).

While such technocentric digital optimism, particularly when generalised to low income contexts is shown in this paper to be problematic and is already the target of insightful critiques – see Buckingham (2007), Leaning (2010) and Slater (2014) – increasing numbers of academic studies explore how (mainly) Western children use, learn from, take risks with or become vulnerable to the effects of digital media (Livingstone, 2009; Livingstone and Haddon, 2012). These range from apps and videogames to Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram (Berson & Berson, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Lewis, 2014) and provide several insights into children’s media usage that can illuminate discussions in the global south. boyd (2014) stresses that in the US the internet connects children with those they already have most in common with, *homophily*, sometimes rooted in histories of oppression and bigotry. This is potentially a practice of safety and identity building for youth from oppressed groups: ‘[r]acial segregation dynamics are a fundamental part of many teens’ lives – urban and suburban, rich and poor. When they go online, these fraught dynamics do not disappear’ (2014: 166). Livingstone (2002: 166-167) points out that ‘family’ has become an emotive and contested notion, the locus of normative expectations and moral anxieties. Gardner and Davis (2013) argue that aside from a small number of risk taking behaviours involving Snapchat or Instagram and contrary to what adults appear to believe, digital media and apps in particular are used overwhelmingly by young people in the US to avoid risks such as getting lost or being alone. These studies pose insightful questions for further research in highly mediated contexts. However, two perhaps unwitting side-effects of this digital/youth juxtaposition in Western studies has been a) limited theorising of digital media/youth in low and middle income contexts in the global south resulting from the transfer of Western-generated theory and evidence without regard to context, history, or class; and b) a notable lack of scholarly interest in non-digital media and circumstances facing children and youth in low income areas of the global south. Tondeur et al.’s (2010) quantitative study of children, ICT use and cultural capital in Belgium, for instance, is not untypical in beginning with the comment: ‘The fast development of

information and communication technology (ICT) has brought about profound changes in the way we live and work, creating what is referred to as a “knowledge-based society” (2010: 152), with no reference to who ‘we’ are. Reading a universal relationship between children and ICTs from European and American studies results, at best, in a misrepresentation of global south lives and concerns (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2008). De-centring technology, and particularly the digital, works to a certain extent in returning attention to the variety of childhoods and to the normative and social construction of childhood.

### **Childhood studies**

Recent work in the new sociology of childhood encourages a historicised account of social constructions of childhood (Cunningham, 2005; James & James 2004; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). In particular, these writers critique the construction and naïve assumption of normative versions of childhood, culture and family in Western modernity. Their work suggests that a more useful conceptualisation of ‘childhood’ is attentive to the real lived contexts, needs and socio-political *interests* of the majority of the world’s children. These contexts and children can be seen in the work of Katz in Sudan (2004), Kilbride, Suda & Njeru in Kenya (2001), Kovats-Bernat in Haiti (2006), Khan (2007) in Pakistan, Dyson (2014) and Balagopalan (2014) in India. Their ethnographies show how children navigate caring relationships, family-life, friendship, school, exclusion from school, labour – forced, paid and voluntary – extreme poverty as well as neglect, abuse, violence, manipulation, structural injustice, loss, mental and physical illness with ingenuity, solidarity, agency, and dignity. On city streets, in factories, in forests, villages, small towns, ghettos and playgrounds, children from both economically stable and deprived backgrounds negotiate the everyday, social change and the unexpected. Conformity, violence or escape are common survival strategies. Radio, television and occasionally mobile phones feature alongside oral story-telling, songs, music, comics, religious and secular theatre, and play in scaffolding domiciled children’s leisure if they have any, while remaining generally peripheral in the lives of street children.

By contrast, many media-centric discussions of childhood – and in particular those that relate to *the digital* – develop frameworks and theories based on data about the lives of what is a rather small proportion of children living normatively recognisable European childhoods. Studies are generally situated in densely mediatised North America, Europe, Australia-New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and materially well off parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In

titles like ‘Raising children in a digital age’, ‘The app generation’, ‘Cyber-safe kids, cyber-savvy teens’, ‘High tech tots’ and ‘Childhood in a digital world’, the world of children is represented, theorised and imagined as digital – never uniformly, but always saliently. Here, children engage and negotiate actively with the digital world within a generally-agreed context of state provision of education, healthcare for sick parents, private and public service media, and Western, urban, frequently middle-class, family values (Livingstone, 2009). Rare studies of children and media in other parts of the world (Strelitz & Boshoff, 2008; Kam et al., 2007; Arora, 2008) seem the exotic exception rather than the norm. Burman (1995) and Wells (2009) elaborate ruptures between Western constructions of childhood – as ideally innocent, vulnerable, unproductive, fun-filled and school-going – and the historical and political realities of childhood for most of the world’s children. Wells demonstrates the ways in which hegemonic conceptions of childhood relativise suffering, neutralise children’s complicated agency, and discount the heterogeneity of children’s lives. Apart from an analysis of charity campaign representations, however, Wells makes little mention of media for or relating to children. This is significant because media such as cassette tapes, radio and television and now the internet play a role in the socialisation of children into imaginaries of gender, racial and ethnic discrimination and class exclusion (Rajagopal, 2001; Wasko et al., 2001). They also help to build subcultural and inter-generational solidarity or conflict through imagination, information, fun and pleasure (Banaji, 2006; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Khan, 2014).

Although these might seem to be in tension, the analysis in this paper is influenced by structuralist and phenomenological perspectives (Katz, 2004; Sarup, 2011). Together, these allow significant meanings, material objects, and social practices to emerge from the accounts of research subjects situated in specific material contexts and provide a conceptual framework for interrogating the place of media in children’s lives. The paper works with the concept of class as a dialectic of structure and agency – both reflexive space and a constraining social location; and on the concept of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; Katz, 2004), through which human agency plays a role in perpetuating social structures and values, whether emancipatory and constraining. Drawing on accounts from Cultural Studies (Willis, 1977) it also suggests a new concept at the intersection of class, creativity and social reproduction: ‘resourceful conservation’, and contributes to what might yield a growing body of work addressing questions about the role of media in the experience of childhood in the global south.

The discussion so far suggests that both the non-mediated and the media-linked complexity of children’s lives in the global south are thinned down by narratives about the

salient or ubiquitous nature of digital technologies in ‘modern childhood’ as much as they are by the framing of global south children’s media engagement by the crude rhetoric of modernisation, participation and development through ICTs. In this case, the problem is not *per se* with discussions of highly mediatised wealthy-world contexts, but with the ways in which discussions of media in such contexts come to be read as normative reference points for studies of childhood and media *in all social contexts*. In an attempt to recover non-wealthy world experiences of childhood and media and to explore children’s complex constraints and agency, the following sections detail the qualitative methods –

## **Methodology**

### ***Class, space, place, location***

To appreciate the intricacies of children’s accounts of their media use in two states of Western India, an adequate understanding of class complexity in India is necessary. Sub-classes within the middle and working-class (lower middle, middle-middle and upper middle; blue collar, rural smallholders, rural landless, dispossessed, etc.) are characterised by fairly distinct customs, ethics, and ways of being, crosscut by land ownership, language, gender, caste and religion. Lower middleclass urbanites who dwell in cramped bedsits or slums would be regarded as ‘poor’ in Europe or North America, while many of India’s impoverished majority, with insecure, seasonal incomes, are positioned by some poverty-line definitions outside the category ‘poor’. Mankekar (2000) and Fernandes (2004) argue that since 1991 the vastness and specificity of rural, tribal, dispossessed and working-class cultures in India have deliberately been erased from public representation. As an already underrepresented segment of the population, this public discursive erasure has had a disproportionate impact on children in impoverished socioeconomic strata. In line with representational frames which construct India as an economic miracle, most studies of media practices have concentrated on the urban middle-classes who make up under 20 percent of the population. By contrast, about seven percent of India’s vast working-class population – a significant minority of whom watch television, own radios and go to the cinema – has formal employment, protected by labour laws; the rest work in sometimes ingenious but always gruelling informal employment (Hensman, 2011). Further millions are unemployed and agitating constantly for work or welfare provisions; and multitudes, some belonging to tribal or Adivasi groups (Kurien, 2007), are contesting and being

dispossessed of land-rights. In this context, rural or urban origins, caste, education, income and whether one lives in a 'pukka' (brick and mortar) residence or in the open are all markers of distinction. Second and third generation rural to urban migrant children might have parents in blue collar labouring jobs and live in slums or might belong to a street-dwelling under-class, contributing to informal economic practices such as scavenging, rag picking and sweatshops (Gidwani, 2006; Webster, 2011).

Maharashtra, where Bombay is located, has a population of 121,455,333 at the 2011 census. During several field visits between 2008 and 2014, I conducted participant observations, resulting in field notes that informed a thematic analysis, and individual interviews with children in a densely populated Bombay suburb containing many different religious and migrant groups. Some of the children in the study were lower-middle class but approximately two thirds were working-class. Initial contact usually took place in building elevators going to and from homes where children work, in the streets where children hang around, sit or play, at roadside stalls, outside a municipal school and when children approached the researcher to ask for small change. In-depth interviews – which were conducted in a way that sought to set aside prevailing assumptions about school, labour, and media, allowing children to take the lead in delineating what they thought were salient aspects of their everyday lives, affective relationships, experiences and interactions – were conducted later outside children's huts, on building sites, in slums, and in their places of work but when employers were not present.

In Ahmedabad, Gujarat and nearby villages, research interactions and initial contact with children took place between CK, my research assistant at the time, at the centres where an NGO, *Saath*, runs 'Child Friendly Spaces', informal education classes for child labourers. The teacher counsels the families to enrol the children in formal schools and keep them out of labour. Initial interviews lasted 15-20 minutes. CK conducted follow-up in-depth interviews with individual children in their homes or at their work locations in fields and streets. She also visited the Behrampura (Khodiyaarnagar) centre in Ahmedabad, a primarily Hindu slum settlement. The majority of houses in this slum are 'pukka' (brick and cement), have electricity and tiny indoor bathrooms. Most households have a radio and a TV and until recently most had cable too, even if this was shared across households. National digitization and the cessation of non-digital broadcasting enforced the purchase of an individual set top box for continued viewing. Many homes do not yet have a set top box.

### *Interviewing, ethics, reflexivity*



In addition to participant observation (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) which involved joining in games, food preparation, journeys, chores and child-minding as well as assistance with homework and other educational activities, I chose in-depth semi-structured interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 1998) (conducted mainly in Hindi or Gujarati, subsequently translated); and a systematic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as the most effective method of identifying, analysing and categorising the roles and meanings of media and technologies, leisure, work and schooling in Indian children's everyday lives. Notably, in the analysis I tried to foreground text illustrating the ways in which children themselves recounted their interactions with and feelings about objects and processes including media texts, technological objects, workplace and family dynamics, and their changing perceptions of self and surroundings. This analytical strategy was not aimed at confirming hypotheses derived from previous studies about the association between technology access and economic mobility. The sample consisted of 39 girls and 33 boys aged 9 to 17 [2] who were interviewed between 2008 and 2014. They were asked about families, routines, formal and informal education, housework, paid labour and encounters with media products and technologies. Girls appeared more eager to speak at length about media, and reported more anxieties about growing-up and sexual harassment; older boys spoke at length about their work ambitions. Other than that, distinguishing between narratives of girls and boys is not straightforward.

Unlike studies which concentrate on urban middle-class youth (Juluri, 2003; Kapur, 2007) or childhood in villages (Kam et al., 2007; Khan, 2014), this research is explicit in enlisting the participation of children from rural lower-middleclass, working and itinerant labouring classes, urban white and blue-collar working classes, urban middle and lower-middle classes, and on occasion destitute or itinerant urban families in different geographic locations in India. Notwithstanding simplifying heuristic references to 'working' and 'middleclass' children made for the sake of brevity in the analysis which follows, drawing respondents from such a wide range of class backgrounds is crucial in providing a suitably complex picture of work and media experience as facets of daily life in India. Methods of gaining trust and mitigating power differentials during the interview process involved both researchers in divulging personal information about ourselves, eating with participants and families, and continuing interviews after some weeks to ask more critical and confidential questions. Prior to or during observations, we frequently spoke to, drank tea with and spent time doing everyday tasks with adults. I have used aspects of these conversations to contextualise what children told us, but never to privilege adult perspectives. Some of the data has appeared in previous studies (notably, Banaji, 2010, 2012, 2013).

This study works with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the British Sociological Association (BSA). It also follows feminist discussions of research ethics (Skeggs, 1995) in customising processes to meet the best interests of vulnerable subjects. For instance, some educational studies suggest that obtaining parental consent for interviews is desirable; in this case some parents were repressive, absent, dead or lacking the time to meet. Other children agreed to talk *only on condition* that their ostensible guardian – generally also the person for whom they worked – did not know they were being interviewed. Respecting the children's confidences, building trust, ensuring that they could not be identified through excerpts from transcripts, and never doing anything to endanger their wellbeing either through data collection or through theoretical analysis and dissemination in wider fora was paramount. Therefore, only in instances where the children's rapport with parents, teachers, carers, guardians and older siblings was expressed by the children, was adult permission sought and gained for interviews.

Children's permission, meanwhile, was sought orally, in the languages they spoke, and through an explanation of where the research would go, who might benefit and the possibility that the work and their stories might also have little or no impact in the short-term. With children in the 9-12 year old age-group frequent breaks were taken, and informed consent regained at each recommencement; with older teenagers hanging out and interviews were terminated prematurely or continued over days because of work commitments. Younger children (aged 9-12) were encouraged to listen to themselves speaking on the digital recorder (which caused amusement, embarrassment, even consternation), and then were asked whether they wished to speak and be recorded further. Serious issues of abuse, neglect, over-work and unhappiness, however painful and in need of action, had to be treated with absolute confidentiality. Children's time was recompensed with food, soft drinks, our time, money if requested, training with media technologies, advice about problems and prints of photographs taken. All names have been changed and identificatory details altered to protect the children in their primary contexts.

### *Analytical process*

India is home to approximately 400,000,000 children under 18 (<http://censusindia.gov.in/>). During data analysis I focused on aspects of children's lives emerging from their sometime rambling life-stories, illustrative anecdotes and sometimes rather brief, curtailed answers to

direct questions. Five broad areas – work, learning, family, leisure and media – emerged as what children wanted to discuss. Aspiration, frustration, sexuality, romance and economic anxiety were common topics with older teenagers, with sleep (or lack thereof), friendship, teachers, ‘happy occasions’ and animals/pets surfacing frequently with 9 to 12 year olds. Thematic analysis allowed me to generate codes relating for instance to activities, relationships and meanings based on key experiences of media and technology, family circumstances, work, gender and social class. Amongst (mainly) working children living at home I coded narratives of leisure media as connoting media-rich or media-poor environments, solitary or group activities, constrained or enabled, done through choice or necessity; I compared the frequency of positive adjectives used to describe, for instance, pets, friends, games and celebrations with media to get a sense of the comparative resonance of particular forms of mediated and non-mediated leisure. For this paper, I generated further sub-themes under games, mobile phones, caring, labour, housework and family-support work in general, experiences of education, the role of adults, and attitudes and values of employers, heuristically, in conjunction with aspects of media access, children’s affective relationships to communication technologies, media products, formats, self-confidence, imagination, social networks, friendship, and aspiration. Reference to available survey data such as the census and Asian Development Indicators (2012) allowed me to interpret my qualitative data in light of indicators about vast swathes of the child population.

## **Findings**

### ***Work, media, daily life***

The following information on the sample of children is useful as a way of contextualising the qualitative findings which follow. Of the 72 children on whose interviews this paper draws, 50 reside in urban or semi-urban locations and 22 in rural areas, although of those in urban locales, over 20 had previously resided in rural areas. Many children in India participate in household chores. Of the 72 in this study, only six children maintained that they do no chores or paid work. These non-working children were from securely middleclass families, and all faced high educational expectations. The work carried out by the other children covered a dizzying range of semi-skilled and unskilled labour, caring, housework, and sundry other efforts such as shop

work and selling. Some of it was paid, some unpaid. Across the 66 children who mentioned that they work, working hours averaged 6-8 per day, often in addition to school work, with the fulltime labourers doing 12 hour days. It is in light of these sample characteristics that the following excerpts which are responses to my requests for children to 'describe your typical day' exemplify the routines should be read. These excerpts are broadly consonant with patterns revealed in other studies of children and work (Wells, 2009; Katz, 2004; Dyson, 2014).

**Siraj**, aged 13, is from a slum neighbourhood in Ahmedabad, Gujarat; Siraj's family have a television and a set top box but he asserts repeatedly that he 'doesn't like to watch TV' and never listens to the radio. In line with our observations of his daily routine, he tells us: "I get up in the morning, get dressed and go to the handcart where it is parked. I sell vegetables until 2pm. Then I eat lunch and come here [to a Non-governmental educational centre] to do [basic literacy]. When I finish [studying] here I go back to the handcart in the evening and work till night."

**Vimla**, aged 14-15 is a migrant worker in Pisawada, Dholka, rural Gujarat. She has no television in the seasonal hut settlement but watches TV when on annual visits in her native village, 12 hours away: "I get up and make tea in the morning then go to the fields at 7am. [Fields are 2.5 miles away from hut]. We walk there and back. I work in the fields with my mother. I go home from the fields at 5pm and start to prepare the food for everyone. We have electric light in our hut. I clean the house. I do enjoy the stories on TV but not much chance when working."

**Moyesh**, aged 14 is originally from West Bengal, now in Bombay. Moyesh has 'no time for TV' and recounts incidents where people have almost fallen from bamboo scaffolding when trying to answer 'cellphones'. "I live down there [indicating a plastic and tin shack on a building-site] with my mother's brother and his wife and their baby. Every day's the same: tea at 4.30am, seeking for toilet place [laughs], I keep baby Shobesh while my aunt goes to clean the flats ...she comes at 8.30 then I run to the office and see if boss wants me for any job .... I assist, I learn ... about all those things, I get tea, I carry tools, I bring parts if they need, I clean glass and tiles with acid and scourer, I answer the mobile when X is fitting shower piece, I am learning."

**Bibi**, aged 11, comes from a village in Maharashtra, now lives with distant relatives and looks after their children in a flat in Bombay: "I mop the hallways, soak the dirty nappies, get the baby breakfast, I change nappies 3-4 times and put talcum powder, I wash Lulu (toddler), I dress Lulu for pre-school tots nursery, I take Lulu to nursery, I put baby to sleep and help aunt washing and

hanging clothes. In afternoon Aunt sleeps and I take baby to collect Lulu from pre-school tots, I bring Lulu home and give food, then Lulu sleeps and aunt has tea and plays with baby and I rest; everyone comes from school, it becomes very busy, I play games with them, catch-catch, cricket, watch TV – maybe 15-20 minutes – but Aunt calls me to hold baby. I go to bed after Lulu and baby, usually am very tired and sleep well.”

These accounts of an ‘average day’ contain passing references to education, media and ICTs, though more are mentioned in response to follow-up questions – such as Nikul, 10, who used to watch cartoons prior to digitisation, has a mobile phone and talks to his village friends or Ambika, 13 who watches a Gujarati soap opera three times a week with great zest, would like to go to school and loves 1990s family-oriented Hindi films that fuel her imagination about the possibilities of her own future family life. The quoted accounts remain typical of the urban and rural working-class children interviewed and of others who chipped in, nodded along to initial interviews. They gather wood and leaves, traverse several kilometres if going to school, herd animals, sweep and mop floors, make tea, grind spices, prepare food, cook food, sell things, use tools, look after babies, teach toddlers, sow and harvest grain, run to the shops, assist ill or disabled relatives, neighbours or employers, sort litter, climb scaffolding, paint buildings or cars, deliver things and mend things.

In the cases cited, computers were absent; mobile phones were generally viewed as the domain of adult men, and coveted by some of the younger children and older girls; but there was consensus that television and radio were more fun, pedagogically sound, sociable and egalitarian.

‘Father controls the mobile, mother and we get to choose TV channels’

‘None of my friends have mobiles, so what would be the point?’

‘Mobile coupons are expensive.’

‘I like to learn from television. I like to watch different places’

‘Radio is so good to listen when we are working.’

‘Radio can be very good if you are bored during cooking.’

‘We have a television but no set top box.’

‘We use radio on our walk to school.’

‘I like games. I would like to have a phone which has games on it.’

‘I go to my relative’s home to watch tv in peace.’

‘Mother shares her mobile with us’.

These accounts, which appear banal, are also brimming with children's competence, resilience, sociality and meaningful work. Old media, for those who have access, is circumscribed in a number of ways but nevertheless a pleasurable part of daily routines and leisure practices. Set beside the narratives of children who attend school regularly and have families with slightly more secure incomes, the significance of finance and leisure in relation to new media use become apparent. These accounts signal the importance of interdependencies between old and new media and between generations, as well as the salience of what I will elaborate as insight into the way recourse to practices of resourceful material and immaterial conservation by children sheds light on the relationship between media and the experience of childhood in the global south. The following sections highlight and discuss the main themes emerging from the analysis of my data.

### *Media-rich lifestyles*

Shankar, aged 13 in Bombay, for instance, is an electrician's assistant. He attends a Marathi language municipal school (the cheapest government school) from 6.30am till 2pm. He eats at home and then he sleeps for an hour; his mother, a vegetable seller, also returns to their slum home for lunch. At 4pm Shankar starts his shift in a local electrical shop. He runs errands, makes tea, delivers electrical goods to nearby customers, and assists with complex installations. He often works till 9pm. His father is an electrician-cum-shop-assistant, and gets paid extra for Shankar's work. At slack times 'the radio plays' and Shankar enjoys listening and 'reading comics, newspapers' 'letting his mind wander here and there'; he relays jokes, songs and funny stories from the radio to his work-mates. At home, he does homework before going to sleep. On Sunday, in the afternoon, he and his family go to the cinema. He is an ardent film fan and says he will soon have a mobile phone, like the men and older boys who work with him.

Meanwhile Jayanti, aged 13, whose parents and eldest brother have white-collar jobs and who falls firmly into the middle-middleclass, wakes at 6.00am. She makes tea and packed lunches for herself and her brothers, goes to her fee-paying Catholic school at 7.30, returns home at 3pm with friends. She then uses two hours' leisure to do homework, surf the net on the family computer, play games online and offline or sleep. At 5pm she leaves for tuition classes, returning at 7.30, when she helps her mother to prepare dinner, then watches television and plays with her brother's mobile phone, commenting on people's Instagrams and WhatsApp texts, taking pictures and uploading them while also IMing and doing homework till bedtime. 'I

often make mistakes in my work because I am distracted by WhatsApp or by mom telling some gossip from her newsfeed.’

These narratives, like those by respondents in studies by Khan (2014), Pathak-Shelat & DeShano (2013) and Arora (2008), position media products and technologies as familiar and cherished but also competing for attention with a multitude of other possible uses for time from housework and homework to friends, outdoor games and gossip. While mobiles were generally shared between family members, particularly mothers and children, comments about media amongst these lower- and middle-middleclass children in urban areas were diverse and passionate, ranging from ‘I want to become a film actor, comedy is so cool’ and ‘I sleep with my smartphone under my pillow’, to ‘every one of us has to comment on a picture or post something funny to feel part of the group’ and ‘I can do without sleep but I can’t let go of WhatsApp’. There was a lively understanding of marketing (‘You know about *ad blockers*?’), the possibility of parental surveillance (‘My older brother checks my posts and informs parents’) and the dangers of spiralling identity expectations (‘I worry if I look fat on Facebook’; ‘Boys are always saving sexy pics from Snapchat’). Again, increasingly since 2012, my field notes and analysis of the interview data highlight displays of symbols of upward mobility such as branded clothes, new hairstyles, gadgets, bikes, wedding attendance, parties, visits to malls, picnics and even family holidays on applications such as Instagram and Snapchat. Participation in serial identities such as those of sectarian and Hindu Right politicians, or digital participation in populist campaigns against ‘corruption’ and ‘gang rape’, has become increasingly evident amongst 13-17 year olds, mainly via the repeated reposting and retweeting of popular memes and in the passing on of photographs and the ‘liking’ of politicians’ pages, slogans or comments. Questions about the deeper underpinnings of digital ‘gestures’ often led to a disavowal of liberal identities such as feminism (‘I passed it on because my friends did/I’m not one of those (feminists)’), or a vague commitment to a politico-religious project (India needs strong politicians like X – there is too much corruption’). Meanwhile, the dual uses of internet enabled mobile phones amongst middleclass youth as repositories of romantic aspirations and liaisons and also the dangerous means of being conned, harassed or discovered was observed by me, and with varying degrees of longing, anxiety and disapproval, by younger siblings.

Smriti, 16, also middle-middleclass, recounted with embarrassment how her brother became ‘involved’ with a ‘woman’ online who promised to get him a job in Ohio, then asked him to send 200,000 rupees so that she could rent an apartment for his visit. Having shared dreams, photographs and sexts, Smriti’s brother was loathe to admit he’d been conned. It was

clear that Smriti did not view the internet as an uncomplicated good but, like many of the other interviewees and like participants in boyd's (2014) study, felt some ambivalence towards it. 'Now my parents only let us use our mobiles for music and calling local friends. No internet. And it feels better. But I know we'll be back to it soon.'

### *Learning and leisure*

Many normative Western and wealthy-world discourses on childhood have distinguished 'school' and the 'digital' as appropriate (if fraught) spheres of children's 'learning'. Across my data children express ambivalence towards formal schooling, and showed little enthusiasm for learning there. Basic literacy followed by passive, decontextualized excerpts and rote learning dominate the accounts of Indian school-going children particularly in less well-resourced schools, with middle-class 14-15 year olds spending between 10 and 12 hours per day on school, homework and tuitions. Studies based on larger samples suggest that disenchantment is a rational response to 'schools' where teaching is sparse and misinformed, discriminatory or brutal (Balagopalan, 2014; Braham & Braham, 1999; Harber, 2009; Khan, 2007) and to a context where there is no welfare provision. Economically deprived children and their parents weigh basic literacy and numeracy in the balance against apprenticeships, meals, fresh water, fuel, a smiling uninjured toddler. Where feasible most families make pragmatic decisions, building some compromise between socially or economically necessary labour and schooling. Gender plays a malignant role in this pragmatism.

Children who mentioned ambitions to travel and get better jobs explained that television was giving them information and teaching them new languages that school never had. A significant minority liked school because of an individual teacher, or recounted passionately what they would do *if* teachers were better informed, fairer; or if they could attend regularly; and how they wished to study further, become teachers, social workers, health workers. For most working-class Indian parents and children these ambitions entail tough choices about which children will study and which will work. Saliently, when debating where they 'learn' most, children in the global south discuss 'parents', 'home', 'the street', 'the workplace', 'the fields', 'the forest', 'the journey' and 'work' more generally as the places and spaces of learning, particularly about values, nature, technology, the environment and social power relations.

The milieu of the *media-rich* children interviewed (30 percent of my sample), could be seen as similar to that of about 25 percent of the Indian population (with an additional five percent of very wealthy families not discussed in this paper) (Asia Development Bank



Indicators, 2012). In particular, during seven years of observations, and given the interest of sundry scholars in new technologies as agents or catalysts of social change, it has been interesting to observe metamorphoses or continuities in Indian children's mediated leisure. I have, in fact, returned to a dozen children in this study between the ages of nine and fourteen, as families or employers acquired the latest communications equipment. Consistently, amongst middleclass small-town, rural and urban Indian children who have some leisure time, the significance of media appears heightened. While they still play carom, cards, cricket, tag, skipping, and other games or riding bicycles with friends, they also watch television every day. Since 2012, accounts of 'cell phones' and Facebook feature alongside discussions of school/college work, films, radio, television and games consoles. Knowledge and skills in apps, games, scams, jokes and memes constitutes one evident facet of media literacy, but is inflected by resilient beliefs and prejudices formed in distinctly national and regional contexts.

The other two thirds of the sample – who might be said to fit into the 70 percent of the Indian child population classed as poor or below the poverty line (Asia Development Bank Indicators, 2012) – also describe their use of comics, music, TV serials, films, low-tech mobile phone games to scaffold their pursuits or lighten material and social pressures: as one boy put it when describing his favourite TV show 'I play it back in my mind when I'm alone fetching wood, like a sweet kept in the mouth'. Like him, numerous children asserted: 'songs and funny programmes make the work go faster'. These children's world as it is today – packed with complex and time-consuming labour, caring, environmental learning, frequently abraded by exploitative or abusive power relationships, communal tensions, hunger, disease, boredom or fear of violence – and as told in their understated, unsentimental narratives about everyday life, urges a rethinking not only of techno-centric and ethnocentric narratives of global media but also of adult and middleclass ones. Such children's narratives suggest that rigorous labour laws regulating working hours and safety might protect children who have to work and obviate the need for many to work by protecting adults. Albeit contingent, these global south children's relative ambivalence towards new media gets ignored in much writing on digital technologies and children, while as Kleine et al. (2013) warn, any signs of interest are deployed as evidence of the transformative power of new media.

## **Discussion**

The research questions guiding this study asked first, how scholars and educators interested in global south children's lives can understand and approach the meanings of digital media, school and work in the experiences, routines, relationships and everyday lives of a cross-section of Indian children and, second, what such an analysis suggests in terms for rethinking concepts such as 'digital life' and 'digital childhood'. In looking for an initial conceptual frame, despite worthwhile insights, much literature on children and media arising in the media and communications field was shown to have a tendency towards a techno-centric or ethnocentric homogenisation of childhood experience. Whether digital risks and opportunities or media literacy were the chosen analytical frames, global children's worlds and lived experiences somehow ended up being envisioned reductively based on media-centric evidence from highly mediated households. As discussed, a side-effect of the repeated juxtaposition of children and new technologies in Western studies has been a silencing and under-theorisation of non-digital media and circumstances facing children and youth in low income areas of the global south.

While class as an inflexible analytic frame has also been contested in previous studies for reducing the complexity of media experience/practice, with the exception of digital divides, its significance is now neglected in work on new media and childhood. In response to the 'how' question, then, this study works with the idea of class as a both a space and a location, which suffuses, inflects and situates aspects of children's lives constructively and constrainingly in both geographical and mediated places. My analysis of children's narratives and concerns in diverse circumstances in Western India, however, suggests that while a complex hierarchy of class at the intersection of gender, geography, religion and caste is a ferocious force inflecting almost every aspect of children's experience, most children are active subjects in social production and reproduction. This is to say, as shown in their discussions of their play, work and caring, they act in and on their environments to sustain life and social relationships in thoughtful, resourceful, ways, some admirable, some despicable, usually unobserved by researchers of digital life, and perilously discounted by many theoretical models emerging from European and North American new media scholarship.

### ***Children's work and social reproduction***

Global south childhoods from different classes provide an unparalleled comparative insight into the ways in which children negotiate their everyday lives in known and unknown situations. Approached through structural lenses such as class and gender, their own accounts emphasise their will to group conformity and interdependence (Khan, 2007; Dyson, 2014; Balagopalan,

2014), which is sometimes but not always in tension with a wish for independence. Approached phenomenologically, children's accounts elucidate their participation in all kinds of social goods (enabling parents to work; tenderness to grandparents, friends, siblings) and social injustice (caste and gender discrimination; sexual violence; religious violence). Both structural and phenomenological approaches also point to children's solidarity and resilient participation in multiple overlapping social contexts (Kovats-Bernat, 2006; Banaji, 2010) as well as the potential manipulation and perversion of their economic and political agency by religious and political propagandists, neoliberal corporations or non-government organisations and unethical adults. In my study, beginning with worries about being beaten or going hungry and losing their employment, issues causing anxiety to the children ranged from recognisable complaints about bullying, homework and parental surveillance, to false accusations of theft, being caught touching upper-class or upper-caste items and humiliated, beaten or bringing ruin on families, sexual harassment and molestation, parental ill-health and job loss, chemical burns, wage loss due to forced school enrolment. They also feared humiliation or beatings at school because they did not have the time to study due to work; or simply because their name or dress reveal a despised religion or caste; flooding which makes labour treacherous; flooded homes, and being married off young. In the last instance, television serials appear to have played an informational role in alerting some rural girls to issues of child marriage.

In her seminal study of children's everyday lives in New York and Howa, rural Sudan, Cindy Katz defines social reproduction as 'the reproduction of knowledge and skills, the practices that maintain and reinforce class and other categories of difference, and the learning that inculcates what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the habitus, a set of cultural forms and practices that work to reinforce and naturalize the dominant social relations of production and reproduction' (2004: 19). Noting that political, economic and cultural practices are linked in learning about work, gender and generation, she argues that children are all members of multiple social groupings, which at times lead them to contest or resist specific social or cultural practices, while acquiescing and sustaining others. Kovat-Bernats (2006: 4), likewise, in his tour-de-force about street children in Haiti argues that children negotiate the dialectic of personhood through their economic activities and social solidarity. This leads him to argue quite rightly that childhood is 'both a temporal and spatial site of cultural being, and not simply [a] liminal space of becoming'. In other words, children function as and become people in their own eyes and those of others via a complex set of interdependencies. Work, in the lives of children outside middleclass and upper-class households and outside the contemporary West is ubiquitous, and often starts by the age of six (Dyson 2014). It grows steadily more complex,

physically and/or emotionally demanding. It is sometimes dangerous, frequently boring and repetitive. It is sometimes collective but often isolated. A significant minority of my interviewees found it burdensome, and wearying. Many overtly said that they wished they had less work to do, that they could do some of it but not all, and that there were days when they did not have to work. Nevertheless almost all talked about it as a major component of their identities – many defined themselves in relation to the world via their work far more than in relation to media use or subculture. In most cases children's labour makes a direct or indirect contribution to household income, shelter, parental availability for work and socialising younger children. As in the systematic and complex discussions of childhood, labour and social reproduction in qualitative studies by Katz in rural Sudan (2004), Kilbride, Suda and Njeru amongst Kenya's street children (2001), Khan in the football manufacturing industry of Pakistan, and Dyson in a village of the high Himalayas, India (2014), I have interpreted my data as telling a powerful story about both middleclass and poor children's complex and contradictory agency in shaping and inhabiting social structures such as family and work. Evidently physically more vulnerable than many adults, and particularly in situations of exploitative labour and sexual transactions, they are also playful and sociable, agile and inventive, finding opportunities for fun both during and around labour and school. They *are* hard-working, caring family members; *and* skilled, competent workers with serious civic identities, but their fun and leisure cannot be separated out from these identities, and it is repeated playful engagement with work, with media or with fellow humans which appears to contribute most directly to learning.

Therefore, to understand and point towards ways of theorising the meanings of media, education, and work in the experiences, relationships and everyday lives of most global south children aged 9-17, these have to be seen as *interconnected* and not competing domains, alongside family and friendships. For most socioeconomically deprived children particularly in the global south, anxiety and resistance, like compliance, conformity, survival and pleasure are intertwined with work and family, and with school and media. Unlike studies of mainly Western, or mainly middleclass childhoods, most of the lives explored in this paper contained few ruptures between generations in relation to substantive social relations such as gender, age, religion, class and caste. Though media do infuse and inform many brief moments of leisure particularly for children in lower-middleclass homes, physical spaces have not been replaced for most Indian children by digital or virtual ones. Rather, most children use *real space* to learn about and participate in their environment whether rural or urban, to avoid danger and generate much needed resources, which supplement or sustain life economically, or simply gain kudos amongst peers and elders. This *resourceful conservation* – materially, the reusing of sticks, bits

of metal and rubber in games; the alertness to weather, animal and plant life; sharing food and transport options such as bicycles and rickshaws – is something characteristic of the lives of working and lower middleclass children in the global south.

In the material world, which encompasses the digital but goes far beyond it, resource conservation matters, both at a familial and a societal level. Paying close attention to the narratives that children want to tell about themselves rather than to the ones we generate for them, suggests that the concept of *resourceful conservation* can be extended from the material domain to that of emotions and relationships. Participation in preparation for festivities, as much as sitting together to watch the news, or texting on behalf of a busy parent or employer, may be seen as examples of substantive choices in relation to social position, affection and value. Almost all the children in this study, understand the time and attention or the absence of adults as a *resource*, and conserve it by using adult circumstances either to avoid surveillance and to glean fun, or by sharing in, and articulating themselves into, adult work and leisure, which is not built around or for them, but does not explicitly exclude them as it might in some Western contexts.

The use of a reflexive method drawing on critical structural and phenomenological perspectives to resist framing research questions about children via universalised notions of digital access and opportunity or even in relation to the digital at all, removes a range of constraints and determinants in designing research. It becomes possible to see that digital tools and spaces in India are used overwhelmingly by children with access and skill to nest themselves further into the ideological, social and economic concerns of families or peer-groups, to circumvent conflict, scaffold educational achievement, assist in or showcase leisure consumption and to create semi-private spaces within overcrowded physical ones. The media and digital tools in this study were used in seemingly limited ways such as the sharing of Hindu nationalist slogans, memes and campaign literature on Facebook, to traverse unexpected political and creative terrain or to make and contribute to uncharted imaginaries. Old media such as comics, television and radio even when accessed via mobiles or computers, meanwhile, were shown to continue to consolidate and develop a fraught range of contestatory and complicit meanings, ideologies and practices from romance, aspiration and male-chauvinism to copyright infringement, sexual discovery and bullying. As the analysis in this paper demonstrates, all of these practices and imaginaries are heavily inflected by social class and caste and constrained or enabled by location and gender, all aspects of the way media are experienced by children in the global south that need to be central in further analysis and efforts to theorise these relationships.

## Conclusion

In understanding contemporary children's lives, we need to move *beyond technology*, for reasons that Buckingham (2007) has already meticulously set out. In 2010 the World Bank estimated that there were over four hundred million children worldwide living and dying in extreme, subhuman poverty. In India alone there are over two hundred and thirty million children under eighteen at or below the poverty-line, including hundreds of thousands of street children and child slaves, many battling inhumanity, violence and destitution. According to Water Aid, over a hundred and eighty-six thousand children in India die every year from diarrhoea and poor sanitation. These are all features of late modernity across much of the global south.

While my study is based on a purposeful qualitative sample, its strength lies in its use of qualitative methods across a seven year period, albeit with a relatively small sample. Findings point to the dangers of generalising from research undertaken in media-rich contexts in ways that assume that the 'digital' is central to childhood and youth experience in situations where neither basic livelihood nor equitable citizenship are guaranteed. Prevailing theories which privilege digital technology can leave the reader with the impression that 'the digital' is globally ubiquitous and that issues like child labour and casteism should be considered in a specialised realm which is the concern of humanitarian missions, charities and some policy-oriented academics. One of the most concerning aspects of some Western academic studies of digital youth and childhood springs from the problematic practice of inappropriately *generalising* from studies undertaken in contexts with little bearing on life experience of children in the global south, thereby marginalising their perspectives and contexts. While some scholars take care not to do this, others undertaken research that yields results that generalised as if they have universal applicability; a problem heightened when the media treats such results as explanations for experiences that they are not intended to explain. A universalising rhetoric is frequently incorporated into the vocabularies and practices of digital media advocates in the global south (see, for instance, Garai & Shadrach, 2006), legitimizing a techno-centric approach even further. The analysis of the narratives of the children in this paper, suggests that claims generated by techno-centric perspectives about 'digital life' and 'digital childhood' are frequently ethnocentric and myopic insofar as they do not reveal how class and other dynamics considered here inflect children's experience of various kinds of media environments.

It is important to suggest a way forward for research on media with children and young people that neither simply celebrates their resourceful conservation nor demonises their compliance with prevailing social structures around gender, politics and class. The diffusion of internet and mobile technologies across many countries *is* stunningly rapid; digitally generated data increasingly drive commercial and policy priorities regardless of geography or internet penetration; the internet can be a rich and complex playground, notwithstanding the fact that its hardware poses unprecedented environmental threats. Further reflexive research can yield conceptual development and empirical insights that are likely to inform debates in a variety of areas including governance and nationalism, interpersonal communication, surveillance and resistance. Thinking of how media and digital technologies can support a majority of global south children *in the present* in a way that is framed by an analysis of their experiences is one means towards encouraging the production of imaginative and creative comics, games, radio and television programming that incorporates these children's gruelling, mundane and inspiring concerns in humorous ways; and that is responsive to the everyday contradictions they face. This might enable media and digital technologies to be potentially transformative. Such enabling environments are likely to emerge only by building on children's ingenuity and insight, designing intelligent media such as games with them, and through an educational curriculum that encourages social questioning, in non-digital or low-tech spaces for children.

## Notes

**1** For instance, the website of John Carr, <https://johnc1912.wordpress.com/> which 'tracks' every new technological innovation in relation to 'child safety' or stories like the following: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/9795677/British-children-sexually-abused-on-social-media-by-paedophiles-overseas.html>

**2**

<b>Ages 9-17</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>All</b>
<b>Urban/Small town</b>	27	23	50
<b>Rural</b>	12	10	22
<b>All</b>	39	33	<b>72</b>

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