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Meeting Change with Creativity

Interview with Kirsten Drotner

Kirsten Drotner is chair of media studies at University of South Denmark (SDU) and founding director of a national programme Our Museum, and of DREAM (Danish Research Centre on Advanced Media Materials). She is a leading researcher on children's and young people's interactions with media at present and in the past, on the formation of creative, digital media literacies, and on users' engagements with museums, libraries and similar cultural institutions[1].

Tell us how your interest (and approaches) regarding children, youth, media and creativity have developed over your career. How about the projects you are involved in at the moment?

Early in my career I was involved in organizing academic collaboration in Denmark in the area of children's culture. This was a time when the Scandinavian countries of Europe developed a lively interest in approaches to culture that would later be termed cultural studies, based on parallel developments in the UK. In Scandinavia, the particular interest in children's culture tied in with welfarist notions of children as agents in their own lives, not merely as future citizens or denizens of the state. So, my interest in children's and young people's own cultural expressions and the creative processes behind them took inspiration from these trends.

More specifically, I had already conducted historical research on juvenile media representations, resulting in a DPhil. in 1985 followed

by a book three years later[2]. Having spent the best part of my twenties in historical archives, I wanted to turn to more contemporary media issues. So in line with the wider interests at the time in cultural agency, I chose to conduct a media-ethnographic study, not of dedicated fan culture, but of 'ordinary' young people's video-making. I followed about 25 informants for about a year across a range of sites and settings in which they moved, and I analysed their video-making processes as well as their results[3]. This work allowed me to gain insight into the fascinating processes of creative collaboration; and that fascination has stayed with me, even if I have worked on many other media projects since then.

Naturally, the pervasive uptake of digital media technologies that offer immediate and easy options for shaping and sharing all sorts of images, sound and text have turned what 25 years ago seemed like a niche research area into a key concern. I have just finished a project, conducted with my colleague Heidi Philipsen, on children's film-making practices and the didactics needed to further these practices[4]. That work has made it absolutely evident that today children's digital content creation is at the core of exercising their freedom of expression. But it has equally documented that children are not digital natives who already know how to exercise this freedom. They need sustained training to

Image 1. Making stop-motion film offers an easy pathway to productive media and information literacy.

competently use what Uwe Hasebrink and colleagues in the major EU Kids Online project have called the digital 'ladder of opportunities'[5].

While children naturally have a voice, they must learn how to apply digital media to shape its modes of expression so that others may hear and understand, even if these others choose to disagree or reject the result. While 25 years ago I studied young people's media production as a form of peer production within a leisured participatory culture, our current research has illuminated that today children's digital content creation is critically about securing pathways to their citizenship.

"Leisure is hard work" is the title of one of your articles, published in 2008. Could you explain how you came to this conclusion?

The title is really the result of two key findings in our studies on digital content creation. First, we have documented that there is a mismatch between young media users' technical options of production and their abilities to exercise these options in such a way that others understand the result. Many have the technical skills needed, but fewer know how to communicate with media in terms of, for example, narrative, framing or editing; and surprisingly few have a clue about the contexts of power in which their results circulate. They may know about the privacy settings of their Facebook profiles, but they are at a loss to understand Facebook's platform power over their data. Second, we have seen that school provides very little in terms of systematically training students' digital content creation, despite the fact that this training is at the core of 21st-century skills. School, in Denmark as elsewhere, is very focused on reproductive learning (reading, math), rather than on the forms of productive learning that are involved in digital processes of creation. Young media users primarily train these creative resources in their leisure time – hence the title.

If you could send a message to parents and teachers about children's and youth's media creative production, what would you say? What do they need to be aware of and/or inspired by?

We all need to rethink the purpose of media and information literacy in view of the resources needed in the 21st century. In the past, much effort has focused on offering students critical skills of representation, for example spotting ideological bias and marketing efforts. More re-
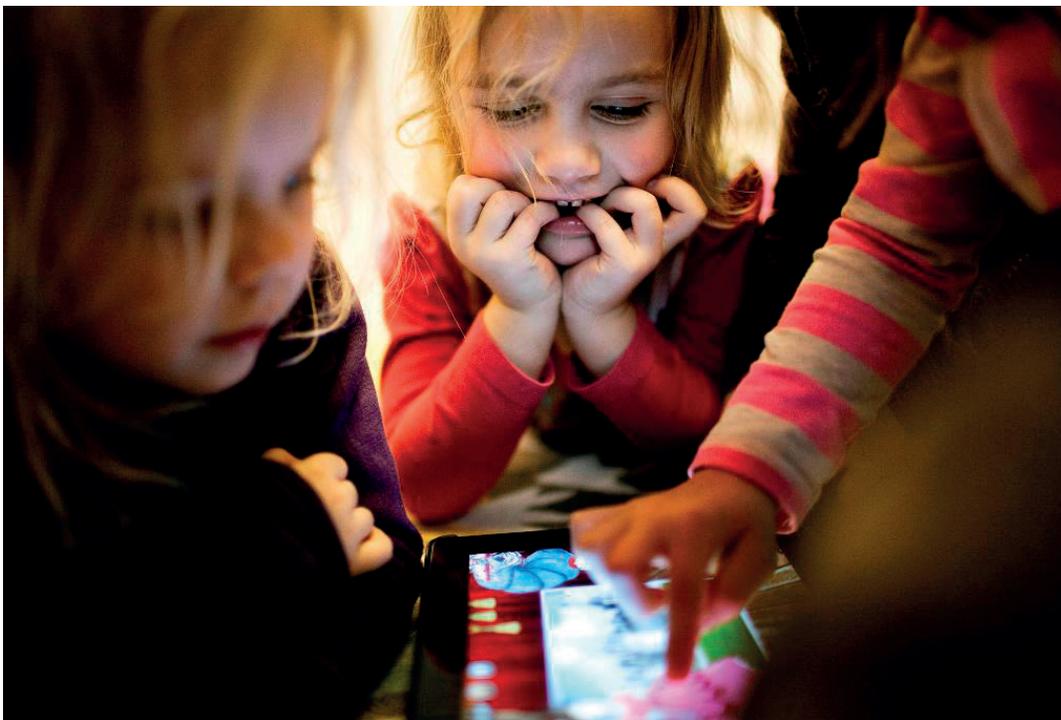
Image 2. Sharing the fun of production is a serious matter, even for very young children.

cently, we have witnessed an upsurge in a technology-driven emphasis on information skills in terms of handling hardware and teaching students how to code. When it comes to children's and young people's own media output, not only third-sector organisations and school but also parents are keen to guide the young about what (and whom) to avoid online. Given the high-profile and very tragic cases of harm, this is a natural first step. Naturally, children need critical awareness and there is nothing wrong in promoting coding. But the pervasive focus on technological skills and on online avoidance very easily implies that adults are sidestepping the key perspective of how we may guide children's freedom to express themselves online. We need a better balance in teaching about media obstacles and options here.

Parents or school authorities, who may not be persuaded by such fluffy democratic arguments, may take note of a report issued by the

World Economic Forum in 2016 and stating that of the generation populating schools today 65 per cent will hold future jobs not yet perceived or invented[6]. To prepare for such dramatic changes, creative skills are needed by all, not merely a select creative class. For without creativity, no innovation, and no training in meeting change with a capacity to act on that change. And where better to start than by advancing children's and young people's creative media competences. They have the resources; they already apply these in their leisure time. But mobiles and tablets are still often banned in the classroom as distracting gadgets diverting attention from the main elements of teaching. We need to turn the tables.

Notes

1. http://findresearcher.sdu.dk/portal/en/persons/kirsten-drotner(b0d73222-74a5-417c-b313-0bccaaf812fa)/cv.html?id=79386239
2. Drotner, Kirsten (1988). *English children and their magazines, 1752-1945*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
3. Drotner, Kirsten (1989). Girl meets boy: Aesthetic production, reception, and gender identity, *Cultural Studies* 3, (2): 208-225. Drotner, Kirsten (1991). *At skabe sig – selv: unge, æstetik, pædagogik*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal. Rev. ed. 1995.
4. Drotner, Kirsten & Philipsen, Heidi (2016). *Udvikling af tværfaglig filmpædagogik: Kreativitet, kreation og kollaboration* [Developing interdisciplinary film pedagogy: Creativity, creation and collaboration]. Odense: Kulturregion Fyn. See: http://filmportalfyn.dk/ny-forskningsrapport-udvikling-af-tvaerfaglig-filmpaedagogik/ Philipsen, Heidi & Drotner, Kirsten (2017). *Praksiskatalog: Produktiv læring med film i dansk og de praktisk-musiske fag. Hvordan udvikles praksis?* [Best practice: Productive learning through film in Danish and cultural subjects]. Odense: Kulturregion Fyn. See: http://filmportalfyn.dk/praksiskatalog-om-filmunder-visning-til-skolerne/
5. Hasebrink, Uwe; Görz, Anke; Haddon, Leslie; Kalmus, Veronika; Livingstone, Sonia. et al. (2011). *Patterns of risk and safety online: In-depth analysis from the EU Kids Online Survey of 9- to 16-year-olds and their parents in 25 European countries*. London: London School of Economics. See: http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EU%20Kids%20II%20(2009-11)/EUKidsOnlineIIReports/D5%20Patterns%20of%20risk.pdf
6. *The future of jobs: Employment, skills and workforce strategy for the fourth industrial revolution* (2016). World Economic Forum.