Giovanna Mascheroni and Andra Siibak, *Datafied Childhoods: Data Practices and Imaginaries in Children's Lives*, Peter Lang, 2021; 200 pp.: ISBN: 987-1-4331-8314-0

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"Insomuch as positioning digital media as the problem (or the solution) of contemporary family life is flawed, blaming the latest technological objects for corrupting the privacy of the home is equally problematic" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 89). Just as perplexing and problematic is the techno-solutionism that is framing naive visions of contemporary education, while at the same time fuelling fears that digital media and technology will corrupt young people's cognitive skills, reading or critical thinking, all of which are considered necessary for knowledge formation. It would be simple – if it were so simple – to understand and then improve the complex societal situation of an enormous and diverse population of contemporary children.

Fortunately, some studies carefully observe and exhaustively explore young people in today's world, such as the research presented in the book *Datafied Childhoods: Data Practices and Imaginaries in Children's Lives*. Its title intriguingly diversifies common debates on the role of technology in children's lives, promising a wholesome analysis of growing up in a datafied society, also from the child's perspective. Following this title, the book delivers a child-centred approach that takes what the interviewed and observed children have to say very seriously. The researchers reasonably decline media-centric methods, but more importantly, they evade the traps of techno-deterministic framing. This should not surprise readers who are already familiar with the authors of *Datafied Childhoods*. Giovanna Mascheroni and Andra Siibak have extensive bibliographies on children, families and parenting in the age of digital media. At the peak of the datafication of everyday life, their cooperation on this book about the in-depth research of datafied childhoods offers an accurate
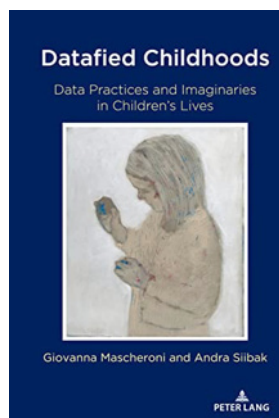
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theoretical overview of contemporary childhood media studies, further developed through the authors' original empirical research.

Mascheroni and Siibak employ various empirical approaches derived from digital ethnography, including autoethnography within the researchers' own homes/families and quantitative survey research, and it is an absolute pleasure to read their thorough conceptualisations of the intertwining relationships between children, the domains of their everyday life (family, school, peers) and the ubiquitous presence of data-driven media today. The evenly extensive chapters delve deep into various arenas and experiences of growing up, with a clear focus that might be welcome not only for researchers of digital media, pedagogy, sociology of childhood and children's development, but also by progressive educators and experts following the public debates on children and digital technology.

Datafied Childhoods explores the complex circumstances in which digital media, such as smartphones and other internet-connected devices, social media platforms, algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI), modify the contexts in which contemporary children are growing up while engaging in various everyday practices with their peers, families and educators. While the authors recognise the multiple and complex changes in contemporary childhood, they refrain from the technological determinism and media effects approaches that came to the fore with television audience studies in the twentieth century. Mascheroni and Siibak acknowledge that the experience of being a child, growing up, parenting, family life and education have been in constant flux throughout history. Nevertheless, they stress that today's children are among the first generations whose life will be datafied from birth and even before, i.e., through pregnancy apps.

In order to grasp the complex relationship between the changes in contemporary childhoods and fast-paced alterations in the digital media ecosystem, the authors suggest analysing this relationship from the perspective of broader social, cultural, political, technological and economic transformations. Appropriately, and in line with the prominent contemporary research practice, they offer an analysis from the child-centred perspective, recognising children as agents and active subjects of their social interactions within various social contexts. Moreover, the research applies the Bourdieusian legacy when considering structuring interventions of social institutions, the socioeconomic status of families, and the educational attainment and digital skills of parents while researching the datafication of children's everyday life. Related to this, Mascheroni and Siibak make a crucial accent by characterising *dataism* as a belief or "data religion", through which they criticise ideas about the absolute validity of data,

its processing and the reliability of algorithms when addressing society-related challenges in politics, the economy, etc. (2021, pp. 20–22).

The book opens with a conceptual and theoretical introduction to the datafication of the everyday life of children that pursues the question one could summarise as: What does it mean to grow up in a "quantified habitus (Mascheroni, 2018)" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 14)? The authors define datafication as a "massive and systematic monitoring, recording, and transformation of our everyday practices online and offline – including aspects of the world not previously datafied and measured, such as friendships and emotions – 'into online quantified data, thus allowing for real-time tracking and predictive analysis' (van Dijck, 2014, p. 198)" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 12). Notably, the authors avoid a solely descriptive definition of datafication, instead theorising datafication within a social-constructivist understanding of mediatisation. This enables them to apply "non-media-centric" research, which is one of the critical features of contemporary studies of *deeply mediatised* (Hepp, 2019) everyday life.

Chapters 3 to 7 study various aspects of the datafication of the everyday life of youth and offer an in-depth theoretical and empirical analysis of datafication in relation to the practice of the self, parenting, home, peers and education.

In the third chapter, the authors frame datafication as a practice of the self, theoretically anchoring their research in the Foucauldian tradition. They are interested in the growing complex of "human data assemblages" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 4) that surround and involve young people, as mobile apps, wearables and even embodied technologies become domesticated in their everyday lives. Digital media and technologies for wellbeing provide a framework for self-observation and self-formation, whereby young people and their lives – especially their bodies, fitness and health – become self-projects managed through various apps and devices. The study then explores how in-app gamification incentivises the agency of the self-governance of young people into compliant bodies who play by the rules of algorithms and their peers, who can also set milestones for the self-project. In the language of the critique of digital capitalism, children and young people are becoming "self-quantified commodities" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 5). The authors seek solutions for this in regulation and media education. However, their interpretation of the data hints that the young people who participated in the study may be leaning towards accepting their datafied selves as a value generator within surveillance capitalism.

The focus then shifts to parents in the fourth chapter, which explores datafied parenting practices within *constructivist mediatisation theory* (Schrøder, 2019). The study reveals that the mediatisation of parenting begins in the

prenatal phase through pregnancy apps and by sharing ultrasound images of foetuses on social media. The practices of sharenting continue after the birth through sharing family photos and videos online; in addition, "caring dataveillance" is a practice of intimate surveillance obtained through baby monitors of health and wellbeing, as well as parental controls and trackers. Altogether, these mediatised parental practices are permeated by the data-dependent business models of technology companies, whereby parents become entangled in contemporary representations of hypervigilant and overprotective parenthood, and where constant surveillance and togetherness, enabled by digital media, can be seen as an expression of care and affection, even though it often strongly interferes with the child's or young person's autonomy and privacy.

In chapter five, the authors explore mediatised homes as datafied homes on the backdrop of the concept of the mediatised modern home – with reference to Raymond Williams and Roger Silverstone – that "has been co-constituted by social and technological transformation that had the media at their core" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 91). Here, the study explores the domestication of connected digital devices in the family home and observes the transforming relations between the privacy of the home and the public outside world. Practices with smart speakers that turn the home and family life into datafied environments and transform family members into data resources are subjected to a detailed analysis. The results suggest how, as in the case of IoT in general, the domestication of smart speakers scripted to simulate anthropomorphic interactions with users is accompanied by the ambivalent users' desires for better user experience and personalisation, on the one hand, and privacy concerns, on the other. The study of practices with smart speakers among family members then focuses on their incorporation of the speakers into the domestic context. Among other things, the authors conclude that datafication contributes to the commodification of childhood, and that growing up in mediatised homes adds additional layers to the inequalities among contemporary children.

The authors further critique the normalisation of the datafication of children's lives by exploring the mediatisation of peer networks in the sixth chapter, where they focus on several phenomena. Mascheroni and Siibak understand social media as an additional "context of socialisation" (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2019, p. 24) alongside the domains of the traditional family, school and peers. They examine the reconfiguration of friendship and peer relations on social media, where contacts and interactions serve as a proxy for intimacy. The invisible algorithmic work on social media is a "coded space of identity" (Mascheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 127) that normalises children's self-identity formations and interpersonal relations among peers. Moreover, online peer networks are

intertwined with algorithmic mechanisms that favour the "visibility of hegemonic representations" (Macheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 128) and the normalisation of perpetual availability; however, unlimited access to peers via smartphone apps can be an opportunity for emancipation from parents. Furthermore, the study draws attention to digital play as a "highly normative experience of play that actually embodies adults' vision of play" (Macheroni & Siibak, 2021, p. 135) and a typical reduction of young players to digital consumers.

Although the private contexts of everyday life, such as home and family, gain much analytical attention, the authors do not neglect the (semi-)public context of contemporary children's lives in schools. Critically and thoroughly, they address the sometimes lightly advocated narratives such as the personalisation of learning and the platformisation of education, which are technologically possible and were strongly encouraged during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the study shows, surveillance is naturalised in such techno-solutionism and has an enormous effect on the education sector and the lives of students. Data reach – or, better said, data-hungry educational technology – such as learning analytics, attendance tracking apps connected to facial recognition cameras, and proctoring apps that supervise online exams, are just a few examples of technology fed with students' biometric, sociodemographic and behavioural data. It is not just that the rapid transformation of the education sector has been accompanied by a lack of reflection; the digitalisation and datafication of young people's educational life have already had highly problematic consequences and students have been victims of algorithmic discrimination, as the book exemplifies with a case study of the 2020 UK A-level assessments fiasco.

In their conclusions, Mascheroni and Siibak synthesise their research with regard to crucial and very relevant questions about the future of digital society related to the challenges of algorithmic governance and its potential harm, i.e., through surveillance of children's wellbeing, children's rights and the role of automation in democracy. The authors cannot hide their great interest in technology per se, which they reveal in almost enthusiastic descriptions of the technical functionality of various media. They nonetheless manage to maintain a critical distance as researchers whose study consistently highlights the fact that the nature of digital technology is determined by how its data management is socially situated and framed. There is no doubt that *Datafied Childhoods* provides a valuable understanding of questions that are still under researched from the perspective of media studies and pedagogy.

References

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