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Distributed digital capital: digital literacies and everyday media practices

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we focus on young people’s use of digital platforms, within the context of a ‘live’ digital media project. The study draws on Bourdieu’s notion of social practices and explores unevenness in the possession of digital capital by young people. We use a live digital media project and draw on a (digital) participatory action research approach to explore the extent of distributed digital capital in evidence with a group of young people from disprivileged backgrounds and their creative use of digital platforms to enact strategies to alter their future prospects. We conclude that for those young people emerging from a challenging habitus, support mechanisms are a crucial element in building a bank of digital capital tradable in other areas of their lives. Communities of practice can support those without privilege to compete on a more level playing field with their privileged counterparts by opening up access to educational cultural capital.

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Introduction
Digital and social media platforms have become ubiquitous, providing people from across the age and socio-demographic spectrum with the opportunity to create text, visual and video content and publish immediately using blogs, social networks, video and photo sharing sites. Access to these sites is invariably free, the threshold for involvement is often low and the proposed benefits for democracy, citizenship and community are potentially significant (McGillivray et al. 2015). There appear to be no limits to creative expression on these platforms, with visibility for user content being guaranteed and the ability to shape discourse in the public sphere moving from traditional media to social media (Schäfer 2015; Poell, Rajagopalan, and Kavada 2018).

However, despite the emancipatory promise of digital and social media, growing concerns about equity of access, data privacy and mental health-related effects means that these platform architectures (Gillespie 2010) can also be viewed as tools for increased surveillance, control and exclusion. Moreover, having access to digital tools and technologies is no guarantee that people are able to access the associated social and economic benefits (Van Dijk 2017; Van Deursen, Helsper, Eynon and van Dijk 2017; Dodel and Mesch 2018). For example, Harris, Stalker and Pollok (2017) demonstrate that participants from...
neighbourhoods with lower socio-economic status (SES) were more exposed to TV, electronic games, mobile phones and non-academic computer activities at home than their higher SES counterparts. Vulnerable young people, especially those at recognised life transitions are also most at risk of experiencing digital exclusion (White 2016) and are amongst the least likely to be online. Having a suitable device to access the internet must also be accompanied by the development of ‘skills, confidence and awareness necessary to use available resources and tools in a fruitful manner’ (Gauntlett 2011, 154).

The taken-for-granted social mores of the past are subject to disruption in a multi-channel, multi-platform age. Recent scandals about fake news, disinformation, and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) reinforce the importance of digital users being able to comprehend the impact of their online activities, not only in the present, but over time. As the UK’s doteveryone suggests:

people with digital skills can go on Facebook; those with digital understanding know how Facebook collects data about them. People with digital skills can shop on Amazon; those with digital understanding know they can exercise their consumer rights on the internet https://medium.com/doteveryone/this-is-digital-understanding-694c2140e335

People need to know when they post family images online, are offered increased digital storage in the cloud, or switch on the location services on their smartphones that there are impacts and effects, especially in the longer term. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests users of digital platforms have digital blindspots which inhibit their ability to question the implications of technology on their lives. The UK charity, Doteveryone, has found that too few individuals have sufficient digital understanding to exercise their own information rights, or the impact of media manipulation methods and techniques on their lives. Bowyer (2019) has also suggested that too few children and young people are in a position to take appropriate steps to mitigate the risks they might experience online, referencing an Ofcom (2017) report that suggested over half (53%) of young people aged 12–15 who go online think they can easily delete information that they have posted about themselves if they do not want people to see it. Each of these reports reinforces the importance of digital understanding – the ability to think critically about how the digital environment works, what interests are at work within this sphere and how young people can be confident, critical and creative (Johnson et al. 2014) – or ‘savvy’ – users of pervasive digital spaces.

In this paper, our focus is on how young people facing challenging personal and educational circumstances navigate their use of digital platforms, within the context of a ‘live’ digital media project. We are interested in the practices these young people utilise to gain understanding and make choices about how to operate in the digital space. Situating the study on the notion of social practices and unevenness in the possession of digital capital requires an engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. It is to this theoretical terrain that the paper now turns.

**Bourdieu, digital (media) capital, unevenness and young people**

The late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu sought to explore the relationship between objective social structures at the macro level and everyday social practices at the micro level. He wanted to undertake an ‘analysis of the experience of social agents and the analysis of the objective structures that make this experience possible’ (Bourdieu 1988, 782). His
work considered the fields of art, education, sport and the media, especially television. He did not develop a systematic treatment of the media as a whole, and certainly not of the digital media space that has grown so significantly in the last two decades, particularly since the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms. However, his work still has salience for the field of digital media.

Bourdieu’s theory of social practice had three main components – habitus, capital and field. The habitus was viewed as a set of durable dispositions unconsciously carried with people, embedding certain cultural trajectories in individuals. The habitus shapes how we act, what choices we make and how we react to given circumstances. As Bourdieu himself stated, ‘children … will simply grow up knowing what is best, without ever bringing those choices and judgments to consciousness. It will seem simply ‘natural’ to like particular kinds of novels, films, meals, holiday destinations and sports.’ (Harris 2005, 38). The habitus has structuring effects, but is also is influenced by the social space of fields that contain specific logics and rules that differ from each other.

Capital, which comes in economic, cultural and institutionalised forms, is the currency tradable within a specific field and differs depending on the logics or rules of that field. The different goods, resources and values denoted by capital are unequally distributed within fields. So, for example, educational cultural capital is valued within the educational field, including primary, secondary and tertiary education. In these fields, possession of the right form of capital provides an opportunity for distinction and, ultimately, positions of influence and authority. In the last decade, there has been something of a renaissance in the application of Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas of habitus, capital and field to the digital (media) landscape, with adherents suggesting that there are continuities between access, interpretations of the value of, and use of digital spaces (including social networks) with the cultural practices of traditional media, especially when considered in relation to the educational sphere. Proponents argue that the privileged and dis-privileged conceive of the value of the internet in very different ways, reinforced by, and reinforcing, their habitus and possession of educational cultural capital (Zillien and Hargittai 2009). A body of work emerging out of Scandinavia has been particularly influential in exploring this line of enquiry empirically (Danielssen 2011, 2014; Bengtsson 2015; Willig, Waltorp and Hartley 2015). For example, Danielssen (2011) has suggested that, while at an aggregate level, most young people are engaging with the digital realm, there are clear differences in use by socio-demographic status once you dig further. He argues, for example, that privileged males possess more educational cultural capital, which translates into different digital leisure culture activities, ‘constituted around the idea of spare time as a scarce resource to be strategically invested in (digital) goods and practices with the capacity to generate profit in the field of education and the general social field’ (68). For these young people, online digital environments are utilised for ‘productive’ purposes, including learning and networking that also carry value in offline spaces. Less productive, ‘fun’ or ‘entertainment’-focused digital leisure activities (e.g. gaming) are also undertaken but ‘they do so to a moderate extent’ (Danielssen 2011, 68). In other words, access to and use of apparently democratic, disorderly, liberating, classless digital environments fail to take into account the ‘force of the order of things’ – embodied in the class distinctive habituses of the (dis)privileged males and habitually realised through their actions’.

Instead, ‘digital media are appropriated in ways that rather serve to reproduce such inequalities’ (Danielssen 2011, 69).
Bourdieu’s formula of social practice, constituting habitus, capital and field can be seen by some as overly structuring (Jenkin 2002) and fixed. The habitus’ durable dispositions indicate a difficulty in individual actors being able to alter their social positions. However, this would be a limited reading of Bourdieu’s work on social practice. He argued, instead, that individual actors always enact strategies as they enter and interact with fields, where forms of capital are valued differently (Jenkin 2002). As new dynamics are introduced to an existing field (e.g. the impact of social media platforms on journalism), so actors must improvise and enact strategies, with their practice being an outcome of the interaction rather than a product of it.

As discussed previously, there is unevenness in digital practices, particularly in terms of age, socio-economic status, access and usage (Hargittai 2010). In the field of digital media, Murthy (2008, 845) has suggested that membership of social media communities is ‘inherently restricted to the digital ‘haves’ (or at least those with digital social capital) rather than the ‘have nots’’. There is also evidence to suggest that the possession of digital understanding or digital wisdom (Prensky 2009) is also differential. Dominant discourses around digital immigrants and digital natives (Hargittai 2010) perpetuated the notion that young people were automatically presumed to be digitally confident and capable. However, over recent years, this notion has been challenged by evidence of differential access and use impacted by socio-demographic status, geography and educational attainment. In essence, the possession of digital capital – the ability to operate effectively within the increasingly ubiquitous digital field is uneven, unequally distributed and experienced (Robinson 2009). Nowhere is this clearer than in the sub-field of digital media, with its purported freedom of expression, elimination of gatekeepers and fluid identity formation. However, the digital media landscape is also characterised by concerns over privacy, risk and security, the effects of overuse, and various other moral panics.

In the remainder of this paper, attention is paid to a creative digital media project, #TransplantStories, which was conceived as a collaborative venture between digital youth workers and academics to explore the reality of differential and unevenly distributed digital capital in practice. Through the vehicle of this project, we explore the extent of distributed digital capital in evidence with a group of young people from dis-privileged backgrounds and the extent to which creative use of digital platforms can enable strategies to be enacted by individuals to alter their future prospects.

**Methodology**

The project #TransplantStories from which this paper draws, is situated within the sphere of digital ethnography (Pink, Horst, Postill, Hjorth, Lewis and Tacchi 2015) but, crucially, with a commitment to (digital) participatory action research (Mayorga 2014). Action research approaches, building on the work of Kurt Lewin (1946), demonstrate a solutions-orientation, focused on experimentation and learning, the meaningful involvement of partners, stressing equality and cooperation and ‘change with others’ (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 1). Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasises democratic and social justice principles, with Torre et al. (2012) suggesting that ‘PAR is an epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation’ (171). Inherent to a PAR ethos and approach to method is the nature of relationships between academic actors and research partners. In the spirit of
collaboration, research partners co-constitute the research problem, the research design and analysis of data. Even more importantly, is the cyclical process of observation, reflection, planning and action (Jensen and Laurie 2016). O’Leary (2014) suggests that PAR is useful in addressing practical problems, generating knowledge (around digital (i) literacy for young people) and enacting change. The #TransplantStories project worked to these PAR principles. First, the project was structured around a primary objective, to use digital and social media platforms to report on an annual sporting event for people living with transplants, the Transplant Games. Second, through the development of learning interventions to support young people use digital reporting techniques, the project generated knowledge about digital media (literacy). Third, it sought to enact change in terms of upskilling young people from dis-privileged backgrounds on how to make use of digital and social media platforms, safely, to produce publicly available media content. Fourth, it was participatory in that the project involved young people as change agents, along with the institutional actors who work closely with them – specifically youth work services. Finally, the project followed a cyclical process by adopting observation, reflection, planning and action in its design.

Though focused on the effects of uneven access to digital capital by socio-demographic status, the project was built on a strengths-based approach (Krutkowski 2017), recognising the interests and skills young people entering the project already possessed. The #TransplantStories project built on previous experience of digital media project work involving the young people who volunteered to participate. Also, in order to foreground the voices of young people as much as possible, the project was designed so that their digital preferences were integrated into the learning interventions and activities included. Ultimately, the project was shaped by the interests and experiences of 11 young people who sourced stories, created their own content and initiated activities which were then facilitated by adults (whether academic or practitioner partners). We also sought to enshrine the principles of partnership and delegation of power to the young people and their support organisations, facilitating the pursuit of their own objectives through training and support, as opposed to manipulation, consultation or placation. The live project #TransplantStories commenced in January 2017 and concluded in August of the same year. It initially included 11 young people from the ages of 13–17 with participants recruited either because they had left school without qualifications, were experiencing learning challenges including dyslexia or had experienced confidence issues in relation to formal education. The young people were recruited by the youth work services section of the partner local authority. They targeted young people interested in digital media or journalism and who they felt could benefit from training from professional colleagues. Crucially, each pupil recruited was allocated a mentor from their school to ensure a better link between the project and their broader educational and career objectives.

A number of separate, but interrelated research methods were employed by the researcher-practitioner team involved in the project. At the outset, the young participants and their mentors participated in a group interview where they reflected on their digital experiences. These group interviews were repeated at the conclusion of the project, at the final debrief event. Digital field notes were collected by the researcher-practitioners at every learning session and shared between all authors via a password protected online space. These digital field notes related to the participants’ experience of the project as
viewed by the research-practitioners. Attention was paid to the possession and development of participant’s digital skills (interviewing, social media, editing), interpersonal qualities and emotional well-being.

Mayorga (2014) has suggested that those ‘doing’ digital ethnographic research struggle with the same challenges as their analogue predecessors in terms of gaining access and trust from their communities. In the #TransplantStories project, these issues were addressed by: working closely with the young people and their adult mentors to explain the intentions of those involved in the project; working to a processual consent model, whereby initial (formal) consent was accompanied by ongoing conversations about consent throughout the duration of the project. Moreover, when using digital media as a practice, consenting to the upload and curation of participant stories (in the form of photographs, videos, tweets) was also necessary. The #TransplantStories project was inherently public in nature which generated its own challenges in relation to consent, awareness of audience and the (potential) ramifications of audience engagement (whether sentiment is positive or not). Moreover, when undertaking digital ethnographic research, the way stories are collected, analysed and shared is different (Mayorga 2014). In the remainder of this paper we discuss the insights generated from the digital PAR, focusing on the participant’s possession of digital capital and its distribution.

‘Doing without thinking’: everyday digital practices

While the young people involved in #TransplantStories all had their own mobile devices and were well versed in using them for communication with friends and relatives, when observed during the project a number of disparities in use emerged. First, their level of digital literacies, understanding or wisdom (Prensky 2009) was not as comprehensive as it first appeared. Several examples of fear, lack of understanding, anxiety over what to do, and concerns over the implications of their digital practices were observed during the initial project period, in particular. Specifically, we observed a lack of knowledge and understanding about where the digital content produced went and who could see or (re) use it. Practice ranged from those with quite advanced skillsets to those unsure of how to create, edit and upload videos. Furthermore, some of the participants had experienced online bullying in the past and were, as a result, anxious about what others would think about their involvement in the project:

The last time I did anything on social media a group of people from my school found out and slagged me off so I deleted everything and didn’t post anything after that. (EC, 14 years old)

The possession of digital capital is not universal or transferable in the sense that knowledge of using one social media platform in a personal capacity to perform communication functions with friends does not necessarily translate into effective use of the same platform for transacting, or other professional duties (Helsper 2012). The digital inequality and exclusion literatures confirm that users often have digital blindspots that can affect how individuals reflect on the implications of their digital use (their digital residue) on their lives (Van Deursen et al. 2017). We observed that many participants were focused on the ‘doing’ of the digital rather than reflecting on the implications of that activity (the thinking). Narratives of young people as digital natives still prevail, even in the context of those working with vulnerable populations. One of the participant’s youth
support workers suggested that ‘the young people have a much better idea of this stuff than we have’ (MM, personal interview). While we found that the young people we worked with were relatively well versed in the use of digital (text-based) social communication, this did not, necessarily, translate into the proficient use of the digital for learning or professional activity. Rather, we observed a tendency towards ‘liberal’ sharing of produced content and a lack of confidence and capability in documenting the lives of others. These tendencies were evident in a strong desire early on in the project from most participants to ‘push’ content without asking why they were doing this, and to what potential audience. We observed little evidence that the 13–17 year olds we worked with had concerns over commercial exploitation and were content to share their data with others without a second thought.

Participants also felt wary of communicating in the written form in contrast to their comfort with sharing visual content. As part of the #TransplantStories project the young people were asked to produce blog posts on a regular basis, which intensified during the ‘live’ reporting of the Transplant Games themselves. We found that the possession of wider literacies around writing, common to those with lower levels of educational attainment, were reproduced in the digital sphere. While the format of social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, depend less on text than the visual imagery accompanying it, in any publishing environment accuracy, punctuation and grammar remain important competencies. For example, there was a reticence among participants to ‘go live’ with pre-prepared blog posts, reflecting wider unvoiced concerns about visibility often overlooked when talking about young people’s use of digital spaces. Building on the solutions ethos of PAR the project team responded to the young people’s fears by allocating a mentor to work on their general as well as digital literacies. Digital platforms venerate instantaneity but to ensure content is publishable, care over the final product is imperative. Brief interventions with the young people helped them reflect and learn in this context.

An interesting feature of the project was the digital media platforms that the young people chose to utilise to deliver the live #TransplantStories project. Focusing on a (digital) PAR approach, we wanted to ensure young people were foregrounded as initiators, and decision-makers, while also recognising the responsibilities of institutional actors (the university and the youth work partners) to manage risks when exposing young adults to digital environments. Beyond the risk inherent in infringing digital media platforms’ terms and conditions (relating to privacy, data protection, and possibility of harm, through ‘trolling’, for example), we also had to contemplate the broader ethical debates about the implications of using digital and social media platforms. As Mayorga (2014) has suggested, ‘one must consider whether one’s use of digital technologies is merely contributing to commodification and the reproduction of social inequities’. While adhering to age-related restrictions for use, it was decided to work with those platforms that the young people were already using and had some capacity and expertise in, adhering to the main tenets of PAR:

I’ve been pretty confident within Twitter and Tumblr anyway but Youtube I did have precautions about that but now it’s if you want to do it, do it. (LM, 14)

As a result, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat were the chosen social platforms, and the choice of blogging platform was Wordpress, which several young people had used as part
of previous school projects. However, despite being actively involved in decision making about the choice of platforms to use, we found that this still generated some issues. Working on a project like #TransplantStories took the young people outside of their area of comfort, into a quasi-professional environment where they had to think about how their peer groups and wider social media entanglements (McGillivray et al. 2015) would view the media content they were producing and sharing. In particular, it was clear that for young people facing challenging personal and educational circumstances, the school environment was ineffective at protecting them from potential online abuse:

When the teachers say ‘just tell us about it’ they don’t really think about the fact that maybe back in their day telling the teacher was enough. It’s not enough now because there’s social media and it’s done outside of school and not just in. (LM, 14)

Context is important here because the young people’s social media feeds were quickly filled with tweets, posts and likes about topics that disrupted their personal online identities. As a result, we encouraged the young people to use project accounts and to use the #TransplantStories hashtag, to distance themselves from their private lives and connections. The young people were clearly capable, but worried about previous bad experiences with their peers that had subsequently stopped them being visible personally online. Using the project #Transplantstories as a vehicle limited some of those concerns, ‘doing Transplant Games was different because it didn’t actually have me in all the twitter posts. Most of them that were on @TransplantStories were anonymous.’ (EC, 14).

**Digital disruptions: enacting strategies**

As noted previously, one of the criticisms labelled at the work of Pierre Bourdieu relates to the apparently fixed nature of the habitus and its durability. His use of words like unconscious and unthinking have encouraged critics to suggest that the concept of habitus is inherently structuralist, limiting the opportunity for individuals to employ strategies to work with, and against, the socio-cultural contexts from which they have emerged. However, there is evidence in Bourdieu’s writing of the ability to enact strategies that can alter social position and impact on social practice (Jenkin 2002). Specifically, the encounter between habitus, capital and field provides possibilities. As individuals emerging from a particular habitus (where perhaps access to technology, data plans and adult guidance on appropriate content was absent) enter the digital media field, different forms of capital are assigned value. As young people from dis-privileged socio-economic backgrounds interact with the digital field, the capital valued in the offline world is less valuable. Online, there are different rules and behaviours, activities and etiquettes. To misrecognise the cultural mores that operate in this field is to demonstrate the absence of cultural capital in that space.

The #TransplantStories project highlighted how young people enter the digital sphere with differential banks of capital, but deficits can be addressed through support, education and peer learning. In this study, we worked closely with young people to help them develop strategies to address deficits of cultural and social capital, through interaction with the digital environments they use. These deficits were often related to confidence and self-esteem, as illustrated by one of the youth workers, ‘Giving them the autonomy to make their own decisions and had the confidence to do it’ (MM, personal
interview). While it is impossible to extract yourself, completely, from the durable dispositions that impact your lives, techniques do exist to alleviate the worst excesses of feeling like a ‘fish out of water’ (Bourdieu 1984). The secondary and tertiary education system does little to provide the skills, understanding and critical reflection to address the problems some young people are facing. There are, however, ways for young people to develop confidence and skills that be translated into their other personal and educational fields. Action-focused pedagogies can help young people learn in an environment where enjoyment is balanced with skill acquisition and critical thinking about the value of the digital sphere. The young participants generated digital capital while having fun, evidenced in post-project reflections: ‘the Transplant Games was a great 3 days, where I got to contribute to the team by creating video interviews while still having a laugh with the other young reporters’ (LB, 13). However, to be able to enact strategies in the future that help transform lives, the acquisition of skills and competencies is also crucial. The young people were able to reflect on the skills they possessed by the time the project was complete:

- How to record videos, the best background, the best sound, things to ask people so it doesn’t get boring (LB, 13)
- Light and sound stuff, even now when I take pictures I check the background, also how to ask professional questions (KC, 13)
- It was great to have a platform, we had quite a large reach at one point. It was great to see how far it could go (RA, 13)

It is important to acknowledge that possession of new skills does not necessarily lead to change in young people’s life trajectories, unless they also build their self-esteem, confidence and motivation to take those skills into educational and employment situations. The informal learning environment developed in #TransplantStories set out to encourage doing and thinking, which for the youth work partners proved successful, ‘I think the style of teaching has just suited them really well’ (LC, personal interview) and ‘The conversations the young people have already had with you guys – lecturers, professors, doctors. It’s normalising the situation for them – for my young people’ (MH, personal interview). The normalisation of interactions with those previously viewed as beyond their reach was a valuable outcome of the #TransplantStories project. Many of the young people talked of improvements in their confidence from being involved in a digital media project that reached an external audience and, in particular, their own role in contributing to that, ‘it allowed me to develop my confidence when speaking to people … how to guide a conversation’ (RA, 13).

**Sustaining strategies: cashing in digital capital**

Livingstone (2014) has argued that technology is often pushed into civic spaces such as schools, libraries and community centres ‘guided more by enthusiasm over evidence … although teacher training, curriculum development and parental support have been slower and more sporadic’ (22). She also suggests that the best initiatives work on a small scale, balancing risk proportionally with fun and everyday experiences. In the #TransplantStories project, these principles were adopted, with value being given to
working by stealth with young people over an extended period of time, addressing vulnerabilities associated with interpersonal and digital skill-related issues before foregrounding the digital. So, for example, some of the young people involved in #TransplantStories were shy, nervous, lacking in confidence in social situations, and concerned about writing or talking to camera (or interviewing) because of their pre-existing (negative) formal educational experiences, ‘I was always bad at speaking to people. I’ve never been good at talking to people, even family members, or close friends. It’s always a barrier that goes up’ (EC, 14).

However, over the course of the four-month project period – with the support of institutional gatekeepers – we were able to develop strong relationships with and between individuals to ensure that the culmination of the project was not viewed as too onerous and worrisome. As a result, by the end of the project, most participants knew more about literacy more generally and about digital (media) literacies, specifically. As part of a project debrief, we asked participants to identify the knowledge and skills they felt had been accrued over the course of the previous 10 weeks. Their responses can be categorised into three main areas: digital skills; interpersonal skills and emotional skills. First, participants talked of the importance of understanding more about ‘how to’ use the digital and social media platforms professionally, stating:

I know how to use lots of different social media platforms
I know how to manage sound and video quality
Tags are really important
How social media feeds off blogs
How to write a blogpost
I can edit videos
Use camera angles and framing

The young people also emphasised the interpersonal skills they had learned, both during the instructional element of the project and in covering the Transplant Games themselves. The participants talked of ‘meeting new people’, ‘I can successfully conduct an interview’, ‘interview people with confidence’, ‘learned how to ask good and interesting questions’. Finally, the young participants reflected on the impact of participation in a digital project on their emotional well-being. They spoke of being able to ‘speak out in a crowd and give my opinion’, ‘interview people with confidence’, ‘speak out more confidently’, ‘become more confident when approaching people’, ‘have the confidence to interview lots of people with different roles’.

However, the skills and competencies described here do not necessarily translate into forms of capital that can be traded in the educational or employment field (s). It is important not to over-state the transformative potential of one-off digital projects and the transferability of capital from one field to another. That said, there is evidence that several young people involved in #TransplantStories were able to trade their digital capital into beneficial life choices in the post-event period. As a result of involvement in #TransplantStories, one young person won the Educational Achiever Award from the Scottish Prince’s Trust and is now at college studying digital communications, ‘I hadn’t really thought about being a reporter at all before but after doing the Transplant Games I wanted to be a journalist. Next steps for me are going to college, get an HND
and hopefully transfer to uni’ (EC, now 16). Another young person took the skills learned in the project into an entrepreneurial venture selling produce online via the Instagram platform.

It is important to acknowledge the role of institutional actors and support mechanisms in supporting vulnerable young people to enact and sustain strategies that can overcome the structuring effects and durable dispositions associated with their habitus. While the individual success stories detailed are possible, the ability to transcend formative circumstances is always like to be limited. However, for the young people involved in #TransplantStories, the support and advocacy of institutional actors played a crucial role in sustaining the positive life trajectories developed during the project. For example, participants were able to secure educational cultural capital in the form of qualifications from their participation that provide the basis of cultural capital tradeable into its economic variant in the future.

Moreover, the agencies involved in the project were able to involve the young people in leading school-related activities (e.g. newsletters, or acting as digital champions) and in other initiatives that sought to sustain their digital practice and build resilience (e.g. covering other youth work events). As one youth worker suggested, three pupils from one of the participating schools went back and ‘took on the responsibility of producing a newsletter every term. They continue to do that now into third year so they train up a first year team and now a second year team’ (LC, personal interview). At an even more mundane level, youth work services and home-school link personnel were crucial in the young people being able to attend learning sessions each week and to ensure that the competencies accrued were recognised and celebrated in their local setting.

It is important to recognise that a project like #TransplantStories is not without its challenges, as the young people recruited invariably had complicated lives. Three of the young people recruited did not manage to sustain their participation in the project, either departing in the first week or unable to contribute in the intense, ‘live’ reporting period. Vulnerabilities like these can actually be exacerbated in PAR projects if the requisite support mechanisms are not in place to support participants. However, for the most part the presence of trusted intermediaries working alongside academic partners, ensured that ‘bumps in the road’ were managed and resolved and participation was maintained. Importantly, time was allocated between the fortnightly learning interventions for the young people to apply their practice within school or community settings, including mentoring and pastoral support. Personalised ‘brief interventions’ (Miller and Rollnick 1991) of this sort helped to avoid disengagement or withdrawal from the project.

Discussion

Young people emerging from dis-privileged social circumstances are known to access and use the digital sphere in different ways to their more affluent counterparts (Danielsson 2011; White 2016). Much of this difference is put down to differentiation in possession of educational cultural capital which influences the choice of digital leisure participation, the nature and intensity of use. Just as evidence points strongly to differential access to, and value accorded to, art and cultural activities across the social spectrum, there are also indications that the way people use digital media platforms is also different. However, the evidence drawn from the #TransplantStories project described in this paper is that we
need to be careful not to simply read off from an individual’s cultural habitus a standard set of dispositions towards the digital sphere. Instead of the ‘notion of rules which govern or produce conduct’ (Jenkin 2002, 48) it is more apposite to pursue a ‘model of social practice in which what people do is bound up with the generation and pursuit of strategies within an organizing framework of cultural dispositions’ (48). It is not possible to completely transcend your formative circumstances, and these will be reproduced in digital media practices just as they are in other social conditions. However, we have demonstrated that it is possible for young people to enact strategies in the field of digital media, adapting their practice(s) to more effectively navigate and succeed in this relatively autonomous field. At one level this is about understanding the ‘rules of the game’ and exploiting the (in) visibility of the digital media space to secure credibility for activities that would not be valued in the traditional sphere of education. For example, in our project we found that once young people understood that they could be influential, attract an audience and have their voices heard (and shared) by adopting a professional digital identity then some of the personal challenges they experienced as individuals were partly alleviated.

Our findings also talk to the importance of more informal learning environments in enabling young people to be confident, critical and creative (Johnston et al. 2014) but also safe and secure. While it remains important that young people are counselled of the very real dangers of cyber abuse and have the rights to be protected by adults in online spaces, there is also a place for creative engagement with digital platforms where learning takes place in an environment that is fun and encourages experimentation and reflection. When thinking about the unequal distribution of digital capital, this is even more important. We cannot presume that all young people possess the same levels of understanding of how to operate safely or successfully in the digital sphere (Danielsson 2011, 2014). Instead, we should start with the presumption that young people’s habitus influences their access, use and understanding of the digital platforms they encounter. Embedding observation, reflection, planning and action in the design of digital learning activities can help facilitate shared decision-making, and the delegation of power (to young people), alongside more equitable, liberating and life-enhancing outcomes. In a digital media environment subject to criticism for the exploitation of user data, facilitating online abuse and paying little attention to privacy and security, adopting a digital PAR approach can at least ensure that users can navigate these challenges in an environment that recognises the opportunities presented by digital platforms while reflecting on solutions to avoid risk and danger. Providing young people with choices – not decided by adults – is imperative, as long as the context within which these choices are made is fully transparent and there is recognition of the responsibilities placed on adults to ensure that risks are managed.

**Conclusion**

In an age of ubiquitous digital platform use, it is possible to adopt carefree attitudes towards sharing, following, commenting, or publishing content. However, there is real value in thinking about digital risk through practice as a progressive and fruitful means of dealing with digital literacy issues. In this paper, we have shown how young people can be supported to reflect on their digital practices in a safe environment where possible
risks and longer-term consequences of posting, retweeting or liking can be discussed and addressed. Increasing young people’s digital understanding, including the literacies that help make informed choices about how to behave and practice on digital and social media platforms is important, especially for those experiencing vulnerabilities in other areas of their lives.

That said, while it is tempting to think that young people can transcend their formative circumstances by their own efforts alone, navigating a complex digital media landscape, there is also an important role for institutional actors, especially when vulnerable young people are involved. Our findings suggest that for those less fortunate young people emerging from a challenging habitus, support mechanisms are a crucial element in building a bank of digital capital tradable in other areas of their lives. Access to devices, awareness of privacy and security and the knowledge networks to avoid digital risks is unequally distributed. However, creating a community of practice can ameliorate these issues, neutralising the advantages that those from privileged background possess from their access to educational cultural capital.

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