DIGITAL MEDIA AS CLASSIFIED AND CLASSIFYING: THE CASE OF YOUNG MEN IN SWEDEN

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Abstract: Digital media are widely talked about as a democratising force. As internet access proliferates, it is implied, structural constraints will dissolve and bring greater equality – if not instantly, but gradually as today’s youth, the digital generation, come of age and agents of the old, non-digital order pass away. Thus, the alleged boundlessness of digital media is thought of as somehow having unbound young people from the larger social structure of power relations. Drawing on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, the present article examines the significance of social class for the ways in which young Swedish men perceive, interpret and make use of digital media in their everyday lives. The results suggest that class, through the workings of habitus, shapes the young men’s approaches to education, leisure and the future, which, in turn, tend to generate divergent readings of digital media. Those who are privileged in terms of cultural and economic capital think and make use of digital media in compliance with the perceived moral order of digital goods and practices as instituted and imposed by the educational system, for example, whereas those disprivileged in this respect, although recognising the dominant scheme of classification and valuation of such goods and practices, tend to use them in ways that are at odds with it, thereby contributing to the workings of symbolic violence, i.e. to their own subordination.

Keywords: Digital media, Consumption, Morality, Young people, Social Class, Habitus

In terms of internet access, young people in Sweden no doubt are well-equipped for making use of digital media and benefiting from its goods. However, access to the internet is not the same thing as using it and certainly not the same as using it in ways that make real the ascribed potentials of digital media. The dominant discourse on the internet asserts that it will bring about a more democratic society in which long-established power relations are over-thrown, and that the ones who will realise this vision are the digital generation—the so-called Digital Natives (Frensky, 2001) or N-Geners (Tapscott, 1997)—i.e. those who have grown up with, and so are assumed to know, digital technology (for a critique, see Buckingham, 2008; Selwyn, 2003). What is left unsaid by this discourse is what separates young people from each other and what unites them with previous generations, i.e. the his-
torical social structures that have taken form through and continuously inform the practices of history-making agents. To assume that the internet by itself will abolish such structures amounts to the technological deterministic fallacy (Murdock, 2004; Williams, 1974). Even if digital media carry the potential of greater equality, we cannot confuse the potential with the real. In order to avoid this, more empirical research is needed on the ways in which digital media are contextually appropriated, while at the same time accounting for how these appropriations are structurally enabled and constrained and how they serve to reproduce and/or transform the social order.

The present article contributes to the literature on young people’s internet use by examining the significance of social class for how young Swedish men perceive, interpret and make use of digital media in their everyday lives, and vice versa, i.e. the significance of these perceptions, interpretations and uses for social class. More specifically, it does so by locating class and digital media in the family-school nexus and by considering, first, the contribution of the educational system to the generalisation of a particular scheme of classification and valuation of digital goods and practices and, second, its potential classed outcomes.

Contrary to postmodern claims about individualisation and the decreasing significance of tradition and a range of long-established social categories—not least social class (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Pakulski and Waters, 1996)—the basic premise here is the continued relevance of class as a concept for understanding social life in modern Western societies— not only in the sense that agents are (objectively) differentiated due to the unequal distribution of various forms of capital, i.e. in terms of conditions of existence, but also in the sense that these differences are embodied and (subjectively) sensed, and so tend to organise the ways in which agents navigate themselves in the social world, thereby reproducing and/or transforming the existing class structure. In accordance with this Bourdieuan perspective on social class (further outlined below), class consciousness and political formation are potential elements of class, though they are not necessary conditions for its existence as a social force. In this respect, the practical sense of social proximity/distance must not even be interpreted in terms of social class (Skeggs, 1997), because contrary to, for example, gender differences, which are ascriptive in character, social classes are also (re)produced through the workings of capitalism as an economic system, and so they comprise, but are not reducible to, subjective experience and identities (Sayer, 2005).

To say that class and gender are two different things is not to imply that they are separated in everyday practice. Rather, they inevitably interact with each other (see Connell, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 1997), for example in shaping the relationship to digital media among the young men studied here. Though this interaction is de-emphasised in the analysis below, it must be stressed that these men, like all men – including men who produce knowledge about men – are gendered agents. Throughout history, (male-dominated) social (class) theory and analysis have served to maintain gender inequalities precisely by not acknowledging this, i.e. by treating men/masculinity either as the unspoken norm of humanity, or as an articulated, yet unproblematic, pre-given (Hearn, 1998). Today, research on men/masculinity has established itself as a discipline generally characterised by a commitment to both gender theory and feminism. Masculinity, when understood as socially constructed – in relation to femininity, but also to class, race/ethnicity, etc. – has thus been increasingly problematised in terms of (patri-archal) power and violence. Connell (2005), for instance, argues that different masculinities are associated with different positions of power and, more specifically, she talks about a hegemonic masculinity as dominant in relation to marginalised and subordinate masculinities. Against the backdrop of contemporary technological changes, labour market transformations (e.g. declining industrial employment) and crisis tendencies in the gender order (see Connell, 2005; Hirdman, 1990), it is important to
consider the ways in which young men, from different classes, construct forms of masculinity through the use of digital media in the context of school and family, because this can yield insights about inequalities in terms of both gender and class.

**EMPIRICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CLASS: RECENT FINDINGS**

Sweden is often considered an egalitarian country due to its relatively small economic divides and the fact that access to higher education is free of charge. However, current research clearly indicates the continued significance of social class in a range of respects. A report from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (2010) demonstrates a significant increase in income inequality since the early 1990s, and defines more than ten percent of Swedes as relatively deprived in 2007. Another study estimates that about 220,000 Swedish children were living in poverty in 2008 (Salonen, 2010). Furthermore, the increase in social mobility came to a halt in the 1980s and 1990s (Jonsson, 2004), and parents’ educational level is still important for who attends higher education (Statistics Sweden, 2010). These inequalities, moreover, are still manifested in different lifestyles, cultural practices, and attitudes in a range of areas (see Oskarson, 2008; Svalfors, 2004), which suggests limits to the assumed individualisation process. Hence, no matter how class is conceptualised, there seems to be limited empirical support for the widespread idea of Sweden being a classless society.

Thus far, the significance of social class for young people’s digital media consumption has not been examined to a great extent, and certainly not in Sweden. One recent survey, accounting only for questions of access and rate of internet use, shows that parents’ educational level correlates positively with the latter among the youngest, but, otherwise, has limited impact (Findahl, 2010). Internationally, however, more studies have been conducted, many of them looking more closely at the significance of class for how digital media are approached and used among young people. Put briefly, the general conclusion to be drawn from these is that class matters – in terms of (quality of) access, interest, and frequency, breadth and type of use (Lee, 2008; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; North et al, 2008). Nevertheless, knowledge of the relations between class and digital media use remains quite limited. It is therefore important to further unravel the complex relationship between youth, class and digital media as manifested in different contexts.

**CONCEPTUALISING CLASS AND DIGITAL MEDIA**

**TECHNOLOGIES-AS-TEXTS**

The approach to digital media technology adopted here builds on the idea of technologies-as-texts, i.e. as artefacts that do not carry their own intrinsic meaning, but become meaningful through social and symbolic processes of production, marketing, consumption, regulation, etc. (du Gay et al, 1997; Mackay, 1997). This is not to say that digital technology lacks distinctive properties, but rather that these properties are shaped, partly by political and economic interests (Chadwick, 2006; Mosco, 2004), and partly by the ways in which they are appropriated by users in different contexts (Jansson, 2010; Miller and Slater, 2000; Olsson, 2006). This way of conceptualising technology as socially shaped, owes much to Williams’ (1974) critique of technological determinism, as well as to Hall’s (1980) communication model, which considers media texts as being encoded with a preferred reading, which is then supported, negotiated or opposed by the audience at the moment of decoding (Mackay and Gillespie, 1992). Looking at digital technologies as texts, then, implies that certain readings, i.e. interpretations and uses of them, more than others, are in line with the interests of the governmental and commercial bodies struggling for control over their meaning. In the education system, for instance, digital media may become part not only of
school’s curricula, but also of its officially sanctioned moral education and classification/valuation of knowledge and abilities, such that certain digital goods and practices are judged as socially and morally valuable and desirable, while others are not.

**CAPITAL AND HABITUS**

In examining the significance of social class for how young men perceive, interpret and use digital media, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is brought into play. It allows us to study digital media use as embedded in everyday life, without losing track of the ways in which it is enabled and/or constrained by social structures. For Bourdieu (1984), class cannot be reduced to strictly economic relations. Rather, he argues, agents and groups of agents are objectively differentiated in a social space of relations by their overall volume and composition of the forms of capital that are effective, i.e. operate as power resources in this space, but also by changes over time in the volume and structure of their capital. In addition to (a) economic capital (income, wealth, inheritance, etc.), the main forms of capital are (b) cultural capital – which can exist as embodied (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and the body), objectified (cultural goods of various kinds), and institutionalised (educational qualifications) – and (c) social capital, i.e. the actual or potential resources linked to relationships and group memberships (Bourdieu, 1986). When these forms of capital are perceived and recognised as legitimate, Bourdieu (1989) speaks of them in terms of (d) symbolic capital.

For Bourdieu, then, class is a relation of dominance which is constituted in the material as well as the symbolic realm, i.e. in the objective conditions of existence and in the minds and bodies of agents. The struggle over capital is fought on unequal terms not only because the forms of capital are unequally distributed and transmitted intergenerationally within the family (Bourdieu, 1986), but also because access to symbolic capital entails the power to define the very terms of this struggle. For instance, in order to achieve academic success, agents entering the field of education must comply with its established norms, according to which practices, abilities, manners, etc. are valued, which, in turn, tends to favour those who are already habituated to these norms, i.e. children from highly educated families (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Willis, 1977). Insofar as these unequal terms are taken for granted, i.e. misrecognised, one can speak of a symbolic violence, i.e. “... the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167).

From the very start, therefore, agents have different life chances, which makes certain life trajectories more likely than others. Bourdieu postulates that this is due to the complexity of social position/habitat and disposition/habitus. Agents who share similar class positions in social space have in common certain conditions and so tend to incorporate similar dispositions – schemes of perceptions, appreciations and actions – i.e. a similar habitus. This, in turn, tends to condition them to the conditions characteristic of their positions and, consequently, tends to reproduce the existing class structure (Bourdieu, 1984, 1987, 1989). Habitus, then, explains why agents from highly educated families often feel more at home in the field of education than do agents whose families lack educational merits. They have acquired a habitus that fits the field; without knowing why, they know how to act in order to succeed. But since habitus entails the capacity not only to produce classifiable goods and practices, but also to perceive and appreciate (i.e. classify) such goods and practices, this sense of one’s place/class is necessarily also a sense of the place/class of others, i.e. a sense of social proximity/distance, by which agents navigate themselves in the social space (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989). Habitus is the objective social order embodied, which is why agents who are short of the capital necessary for success in the educational field often take for granted the rules of the game, thereby contributing, though not deliberately, to the work-

**Classes and classifications**

For Bourdieu, consequently, the class struggle is not only a struggle over material resources, but also a classification struggle, i.e. a symbolic struggle over the “... legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 13). In this struggle, which is fought in the most diverse fields of practice (e.g. education, digital media), agents and groups are unequally armed because of their different access to capital, and furthermore, the social world cannot be constructed in just any way:

“In the struggle to make a vision of the world universally known and recognized, the balance of power depends on the symbolic capital accumulated by those who aim at imposing the various visions in contention, and to the extent to which these visions are themselves grounded in reality.” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 15)

Hence, Bourdieu (1987) argues, the chances for dominated visions of social reality to be-come constituted and prevail are small – first, because they tend to not exist in the minds and bodies (i.e. habitus) of the dominated and, second, because the dominant continuously try to impose their own vision, by means of which they can legitimise their privilege.

Deploying these ideas in relation to young men’s interpretations and uses of the internet and its associated goods and practices implies, then, that neither the latter nor the former are of equal worth, and that the dominant scheme of classification and valuation according to which they are judged is not neutral to social class in its causes or in its effects. For instance, the educational system – focused on here because of its authority to institute and impose such schemes – manifests itself through a class of agents, unified by an investment of time and energy in the acquisition of legitimate cultural capital and, consequently, by an interest in reproducing its value – not through conscious calculation, but through habitus in action. Hence, its members will be inclined to classify not only digital goods and practices in line with this interest, but also the agents who, due to their natal class, enter the field of education with unequal access to legitimate cultural capital, and who therefore, through the workings of habitus, will tend to interpret and make use of digital media both differently and more or less homologous to the particular scheme of classification/valuation of digital goods/practices as generalised through education. In this sense, digital media can be understood as both classified and classifying—symbolically, that is, but with potential material consequences, insofar as educational attainment tends to give access to the kinds of goods and practices that are commonly valued but scarcely available.

**Methodology**

As we have seen, Bourdieu’s approach to social class is complex, but at its core is a relational mode of thinking, which gives primacy to comparative methods. The present article builds on qualitative data from a comparative case study, which was carried out in a large Swedish city during the autumn of 2009 and involved twelve young men (age 16–18) who were interviewed individually in their (upper secondary) schools. The schools/study programs were selected so as to obtain male informants who were differentiated in social space due to their access to the main forms of capital. Educational choices were held to be expressions of social class and gender, mediated by habitus. Table 1 offers an overview of the sampling.

The interviews involved three general themes: (a) a set of background questions; (b)
Table 1: The schools, study programs and informants included in the study. Note that almost all privately owned schools in Sweden are open to all and free of charge owing to a tax-funded voucher system. Also note that the Individual Program is set up for students who did not make the grade in Swedish, English and/or Mathematics in elementary school, and who therefore cannot enter regular study programs in upper secondary school. The informants’ real names have been changed due to ethical considerations.

<table>
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<th>School</th>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Study program</th>
<th>Informants (age)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Preparatory for higher education (private)</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Carl (16), Neil (16)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Natural science</td>
<td>Eddie (16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>Ian (17), Robert (18), Oscar (17)</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Vocationally-oriented (public)</td>
<td>Vehicle</td>
<td>Jimmy (18), Golkan (18)</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Patrick (16), John (17), Simon (17), Daniel (16)</td>
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perceptions/uses of media in general; and (c) perceptions/uses of digital media. There was plenty of room for the interviewees to speak freely and at length, which regularly caused new questions to arise. The length of the interviews varied between 50 and 90 minutes, and they were all recorded and later transcribed. A comparative thematic analysis was then conducted, guided by the conceptual tools of Bourdieu. Before going into this, however, the complexity of Bourdieu’s class concept requires some critical reflection on official class schemes and everyday class distinctions as well as on the classification carried out in this study.

The most recent official Swedish class definition is based on occupation and comprises three main categories with a number of subcategories: (a) manual workers (unskilled/skilled employees in goods/service production), (b) non-manual employees (assistant non-manual employees, lower/higher level; intermediate non-manual employees; professionals and other higher non-manual employees; upper-level executives), and (c) employers (self-employed professionals; self-employed other than professionals and farmers; farmers) (Statistics Sweden, 1982). Such a class distinction might be useful for certain purposes, but it lacks the flexibility and multidimensionality of Bourdieu’s approach. He argues that social class cannot be reduced to singular indicators such as income, occupation or educational level, but must rather be constructed, in the course of research, by taking into account “... the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 106). These pertinent properties amount to the forms of capital – including symbolic capital, which adds another dimension to Bourdieu’s approach in that it recognises the importance of the class distinctions as recognised and enacted by agents (through habitus). For Bourdieu, thus, class boundaries are neither clear-cut nor pre-given, but have to be empirically delineated.

In this study, two classes have been constructed on the basis of the informants’ accounts of their parents’ educational level and occupational position, employed here as rough but sufficient indicators of family access to (a) legitimate cultural capital and (b) economic capital (income) (see Table 2). Obviously, multiple classes and class fractions might be constructed from these criteria, but in this study a dichotomous classification seems reasonable, first, because parents with higher education also tended to have higher occupational positions (e.g. lawyer, teacher, small entrepreneur, associate professor, veterinarian) than
<table>
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<th>Informant (age)</th>
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<td>Carl (16)</td>
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<td>Neil (16)</td>
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<td>Ian (17)</td>
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<td>Oscar (17)</td>
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<th>Informant (age)</th>
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<td>Jimmy (18)</td>
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<td>Daniel (16)</td>
<td>D</td>
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<td>Patrick (16)</td>
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<td>John (17)</td>
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<td>Simon (17)</td>
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Table 2: The classes as constructed on the basis of different family access to (a) legitimate cultural capital (defined by parents’ educational level), and (b) economic capital (defined by parents’ occupation). Note that these classes are almost entirely homologous to the structure of educational choices.

did the parents without higher education (e.g. medical secretary, child minder, customer service employee, unemployed) and, second, because the young men tended to separate themselves from each other along these lines in terms of perceptions, aspirations, choices, practices, etc.—in terms of lifestyles, that is, understood as symbolic expressions of social class position.

Consequently, informants with highly educated parents (and relatively high occupations) have been assigned to one class, while informants whose parents lack higher education (and occupy relatively low positions in the labour market) have been assigned to another. These classes will henceforth be called the privileged and the disadvantaged (i.e. in terms of family access to legitimate cultural capital and economic capital).

Considering that this classification is done on the basis of family access to legitimate cultural capital and economic capital, rather than with reference to the political and economic relations of capitalist societies, these terms are better suited than, for example, the capitalist class/es and the working class/es. They are also preferable to the technical jargon of the official Swedish class definition, partly because occupation is not the single criteria employed, and partly because it fails to do justice to the symbolic and deeply sensed dimensions of class, which constitute an important part of the class concept as delineated and operationalised above. In contrast, the privileged and the disadvantaged are terms that not only capture the relational nature and historicity of class and capital, but also manage to say inequality without fixing it to a particular property, belonging to either the material or the symbolic realm. And contrary to technical definitions of occupational categories, such as intermediate non-manual employees, being the privileged or the disadvantaged is also something that is subjectively sensed.

The Context of Consumption

In order to better understand the significance of class for the ways in which young men perceive, interpret and make use of digital media, it is necessary to locate this complex relationship in the context of their everyday lives and, more specifically, to consider the family-school nexus. The consumption of digital media does not take place in a void, but constitutes a part of the young men’s general lifestyles. Being brought up in families with unequal access to capital, the young men seem to have incorporated class-distinctive habitus, which tend to shape not only their thoughts and actions in relation to school and leisure, but also their future aspirations. The privileged males are clearly more enthusiastic
about school than the disprivileged. Neil, for instance, describes himself as “committed” to his education, thinks going to school is “fun”, and expresses a will to “perform well” in order to get “a good education and a good job”. Patrick, in contrast, thinks of going to school as “boring” and would rather “hang out with friends” – “but”, he says, “you have to study if you want to get a job”. These accounts reveal not only dissimilar thoughts and feelings about school, but also the presence of the future in the young men’s everyday lives. Like Neil, the privileged males tend to perceive their current education as a means of providing themselves with a good education and career, thereby complying with the rules of the game in the educational field, whereas the disprivileged, in line with Patrick, tend to conceive of it more as a necessary evil that must be endured in order to get a job.

The construction of future aspirations seems to be carried out under structural constraints, insofar as the workings of habitus cause the privileged males to perceive higher education as a matter of course, more or less, and to aim for relatively prestigious occupations (e.g. journalist, diplomat). Among the disprivileged males, in turn, some have typical (male) lower-class occupations in mind (e.g. welder, janitor), while others aim for professions requiring a higher education, or for careers related to their hobby. In these cases, however, a good deal of uncertainty is involved. Eddie, for example, wants to be a doctor, but does not think he can get the grades necessary to get into medical school, while Daniel, who wants to be a professional e-sports player, stresses the difficulties in realising this dream and paints an ambivalent picture of his future, speaking of carpentry or work in a game store as alternative scenarios. “Or”, he says, “I’ll simply be one of those who work at a supermarket”. In aspiring to positions beyond their natal class, these young men show that the complicity between social position and disposition is not absolute. Yet their habitus seems to exert a certain force on them, causing them to doubt their ability to transcend the constraints of class.

The general picture, then, is still one in which the disprivileged males feel bad about school and uncertain about their future career (unless they aspire to lower-class jobs), while the privileged assign value to and invest time and effort in their education (i.e. in the acquisition of legitimate cultural capital) – sometimes with a certain profession in mind, but mostly in order to keep as many doors open as possible. This also has a bearing on how the young men conceive of their leisure time.

The privileged males tend to interpret and use their spare time by drawing on the idea of a productive leisure. Time out of class is conceptualised as a scarce resource to be carefully invested in order to acquire future benefits in the struggles of the social field. This must not be a deliberate strategy, but is better understood as a product of habitus. The idea of a productive leisure, geared towards education and a future career, becomes manifest in their use of spare time for homework, extra work, voluntary work and legitimate hobbies such as sports or music. It also shapes their valuation of media goods and practices.

Carl, for example, has almost stopped watching television (“just a way of killing time”), because nowadays, he says, “it’s not only school that takes time” but “you’re constantly building up your social network, and that’s time consuming too”. He still watches the news, however, because his mother “thinks it’s good”. For Carl, then, leisure is time to be used, while not necessarily consciously, for the acquisition of cultural and social capital that can be employed in the educational field and, later, in the struggle for certain social positions (he wants to be a diplomat). Hence, television as a means of killing time is not considered productive, while watching the news is believed to be of value. It is important to note, however, that the privileged males sometimes also use their leisure, especially the media, for escaping the demands of school, and that the practices interpreted here as strategies
and investments may be experienced as sheer fun.

The disprivileged too make strategic use of their leisure, but not in order to gain advantages in the educational field. Daniel, for example, uses most leisure for playing computer games, which seems reasonable considering his dream of making a living from e-sports, and John, who wants to be a janitor, earns some extra money by occasionally taking care of an industrial estate owned by a friend of his father. Similarly, Gökhan’s frequent visits to the gym correspond to his ambition to work as a police officer or security guard. But none of these pursuits are generally convertible to symbolic capital in the field of education, and certainly not in the kind of schools and study programs which enable access to higher social positions. Hence, they are of limited use, at least in societies where educational merits are crucial, also in the struggles of the general social field.

Similarly, while the privileged males tend to interpret and use media in compliance with the demands of education, for example by stressing the importance of keeping up-to-date with public affairs, the disprivileged generally take a different stance with leisure-time media use. Daniel can serve as an example. For him television basically amounts to comedy series (e.g. The Simpsons; Family Guy). While these series are popular among the privileged too, along with news and various highbrow programs, Daniel conveys a strong dislike for news in general (“a waste of time”) – especially if broadcasted by Swedish public service television (“those channels suck”).

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The young men thus engage with and ascribe different value to (mediated) cultural goods and practices as a result of their class habitus and the ways in which it organises their future aspirations and perceptions of education and leisure. However, as implied above, not all uses of leisure and (traditional) media are recognised as legitimate, i.e. function as capital, in the educational field. The same goes for the internet. The contribution of education to the institution and imposition of a certain scheme of classification and valuation of digital goods and practices will now be further explicated. When asked about their perceptions of how digital goods/practices are valued in society at large, the informants painted a rather consistent picture in which the dominant morality of digital media can be glimpsed (Table 3).

Using digital media for educational, social and civic purposes is seen as valuable and desirable, while playing computer games, watching porn, gambling, etc. is deemed as immoral. However, it is also a matter of how you engage with digital media. This should be done moderately and in accordance with a well-established standard not only stating that production is better than consumption, but also advocating an ideology of professionalism (see Carpentier, 2010). Hence, agents must be productive and professional when using digital media, at least if they are to use them in the social and symbolic struggles over capital, but at the same time, this strategy is inherently linked to the risk of being depreciated as amateurish when making public your digital creations. Thus, the dominant classification/valuation of digital goods and practices easily transmutes into a classification/valuation of agents. Simon, for instance, reckons civic internet uses to be socially valued and defined as distinctively highbrow, i.e. restricted to the “posh people” as he sarcastically calls those who make use of “news sites” and sites “where you’re supposed to give your opinion or say what you think about politicians and shit like that”. Similarly, Ian figures that “someone sitting and writing these digital codes and playing World of Warcraft” is generally looked down upon and thought of as “a bit nerdy”, just as someone who “can’t check his e-mail” becomes classified as “a weird dude as well”.
Hence, the young men recognise that not all digital goods and practices are recognised as legitimate, i.e. convertible to symbolic capital in the general social field. In order for digital media to become effective weapons in its ongoing struggles, they must be used in compliance with the rules of the game as defined by for example the educational system; that is, reasonably—both in the sense of not too much (i.e. not jeopardising more valuable activities) and in the sense of for the proper reasons (i.e. educational, social and civic) — but also actively, productively and professionally. The question is how the dominant morality undergirding these rules of the game might serve to (dis)privilege the (dis)privileged, who are unequally equipped in terms of legitimate cultural capital due to their natal class. This will be addressed below by considering the young men’s interpretations and uses of digital media in relation to the perceived moral order of digital goods/practices.

**Digital media as classifying**

All young men, regardless of class, have more or less positive feelings about the internet. The reasons for these feelings, however, seem to not only be different, but also distinctive of their class habitus. While the privileged males value the internet as a resource for learning, social networking, (civic) participation and amusement, thus perceiving it largely in compliance with the norms and values of school, the disprivileged tend to position digital media as oppositional to education, mainly valuing their capacity to entertain. This is not to say that the privileged never play computer games or that the disprivileged never access news online, only that there are differences in how digital media are interpreted. But these interpretations also tend to shape how they are used. There are subjective and objective differences between occasionally having a look at the top news at MSN and regularly visiting various online newspapers, just as gaming several hours per day is different from playing a couple of times per week.

Although several of the disprivileged males point to easy access to information as an upside of the internet, they generally refer to it as a resource either for the mundane activities of everyday life (e.g. looking at timetables) or for their (depreciated) interest in computer games (e.g. keeping track of forthcoming game releases). Occasionally, it is talked about as useful for doing school assignments too, but not only do the privileged males stress this good more explicitly — some also use it as part of a spontaneous learning process, pretty much in line with their formal education:

**Table 3: The moral order of digital goods/practices as perceived by the informants.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The digital good</th>
<th>The digital bad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational uses (i.e. the internet as library and news provider)</td>
<td>Excessive use (risking the non-digital good, e.g. school work, friends, outdoor activities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social uses (i.e. the internet as a means of social networking)</td>
<td>Playing computer games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic uses (i.e. the internet as a forum for debate)</td>
<td>Online gambling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production of digital content</td>
<td>File sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Unacceptable content (e.g. pornography, extremist propaganda, drug recipes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mere consumption of digital content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amateurism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Neil: If I’m bored, really bored, I might... like, if I don’t feel like watching anything on YouTube or if I can’t come up with something to search for at Google, I usually go to Wikipedia and just sort of browse through a random article. Just for fun really, hehe. [...] I have always considered myself quite well-read, and I think of it as... I think it’s rather... learning gives me pleasure, so to speak. And I can get that from Wikipedia. [...] Because I’m very thirsty for knowledge and I want to understand why things are the way they are and... like why... why did the King of Portugal stop Columbus from travelling? Such things.

The perceived benefits of the internet extend to the opportunities for social networking as well. First, however, it is worth noting that not everyone engages with social networking sites (e.g. Facebook). Daniel, for example, cannot see the point of it (“I don’t get it!”) and phones his friends to get in touch – “the traditional way”, as he says. Neither does he use MSN Messenger – not anymore, because “it’s so annoying when it pops up while you’re gaming”. It is not only the disprivileged, however, who stay away from social networking sites. Neil uses several digital means of socialising, but has not yet signed up for Facebook. Still, he differs from the disprivileged in talking about his non-membership as a strategy of distinction.

Neil also typifies a key difference between the privileged and disprivileged males’ approach to social networking. While the latter perceive it mainly as a pastime, the former also recognise its productive sides. When Neil has “nothing better to do”, he goes chatting with people from abroad – a practice to which he ascribes the potential of improving his “understanding for how different people and religions can look at things differently”. This can be seen as an investment of time in the acquisition of cosmopolitan capital (Weenink, 2008), and for Neil, who aspires to higher education and a journalistic career, it might pay off.

The privileged males’ accounts also lay bare how the use of social networking sites is not only a matter of the joy of socialising, but also of preserving, increasing and displaying one’s social and symbolic capital. Some of them speak about Facebook as if it were a game of honour. For instance, the number of friends cannot be too small, but it cannot be too big either, since this is perceived as a misconception of the meaning of being friends – as something limitless or tasteless, quite in the same way as the conspicuous consumption of the nouveaux riches is depreciated as vulgar. By and large, the privileged tend to take the intricate rules of Facebooking more seriously than do the users among the disprivileged, judging from their detailed elaborations on these rules of the game and their general preoccupation with the appropriate appearance and behaviour of self and others at the website.

If the privileged rather than the disprivileged recognise and invest time and effort in digital practices that are socially valued and thus can be converted to symbolic capital in the field of education and the general social field, what seems to be distinctive of the digital media use of the latter group is computer games. While the privileged males play moderately, mostly as part of a social activity not reducible to the gaming itself, the disprivileged clearly put the gaming per se in the centre. They take computer games seriously and invest time, money and effort not only in various modes of gaming, but also in a range of associated goods and practices (e.g. game-related discussion threads, game videos uploaded to YouTube).

Moreover, their interest in games shapes their uses of other digital goods. For in-
stance, some of them give as an important reason for using Facebook the games connected to the website. Thus, among the disprivileged males engaging with digital means of social network-ing, there seems to be a transitory tendency related to the depreciated practice of gaming, such that the potential benefits of these means might not be realised. Similarly, they visit online forums not to discuss, but to find solutions to game-related problems.

Robert is the only one of the privileged males who expresses an explicit interest in computer games, but while Daniel and Simon consider a career related to their hobby, he wants to be a journalist. Although he appreciates computer games, Robert thus conveys an awareness of this being an interest he cannot prioritise over for example school-related activities. Rather than building his future aspirations around gaming, Robert tries to capitalise on his hobby to find a way into the journalistic field. At the time of the interview, he had recently applied to write about Playstation 3 at a website, where he had long been an active forum participant.

Similarly, Ian blogs in order to develop his writing outside of formal education, while Neil, who is interested in poetry, publishes his poems on a website where he can get feedback – both practices being strategic considering their dream of making a living from their writing. The potential for using the internet for the production and publication of digital content is more thoroughly realised by the privileged – a tendency exemplified by how Robert actively participates in game-related discussions, while Daniel, though he takes games far more seriously, never writes anything in such forums. Discussing games will not necessarily help you to master them practically, but perhaps it will make you a better writer. Thus, it may be of use vis-à-vis the journalistic field, but hardly if you want to make it in e-sports.

**Conclusion**

The present article suggests that social class, through the workings of habitus, tends to shape how young men look at their education, leisure and future, which, in turn, produce different interpretations and uses of digital media. The privileged males are dedicated to their education and perceive their future attendance at university more or less as a matter of course. This produces a certain approach to leisure, 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. In this fashion, they tend to read digital media in compliance with the perceived scheme of classification and valuation of digital goods and practices as instituted and imposed through, for example, the educational system. For instance, they highlight the internet as a resource for learning, networking and the production/distribution of digital content. And when engaging in digital goods/practices outside what is considered productive leisure (e.g. computer games), they do so to a moderate extent.

The disprivileged males, conversely, consider school to be boring and perceive higher education either as out of the question or as a distant possibility not really meant for them, depending on whether they aspire to lower-class occupations, to professions beyond their class, or to careers related to their hobby. They also make strategic use of their leisure, but because they tend to take school less seriously, their investments are seldom made in goods and practices convertible to symbolic capital in the field of education and the struggles of the social field. This is manifested in their tendency to think of digital media as oppositional to education, so that when not engaging in socially depreciated practices – e.g. playing computer games (which most do a lot) – they use the digital good, too, for the purpose of mere amusement, thereby failing to realise the potential profits hidden in seemingly
banal digital practices, such as information seeking, social networking or online discussions.

Hence, while they do recognise the dominant scheme of classification and valuation of digital goods and practices, the disprivileged tend to use digital media in ways that are at odds with it. They recognise the moral order of digital goods and practices, but disregard it in practice. On the face of it, thus, something paradoxical is observed here, insofar as the disprivileged ought to know that their readings of digital media serve to reproduce their disprivilege.

In sharp contrast to voluntaristic explanations, Bourdieu (1989) tries to solve this paradox by claiming that agents, being born into an already ordered social reality, tend to incorporate this very order in their habitus, thereby taking for granted not only their own position in it, but also that of others. To the extent that agents (dis)privileged by this order misrecognise the true source of their own (dis)privilege – i.e. the unequal distribution of the forms of capital – one can speak of a symbolic violence. Thus, when the disprivileged males recognise the different value given to digital goods and practices, they simultaneously perform an act of misrecognition, insofar as they take for granted the rules of the game, i.e. the dominant classification/valuation of digital media, rather than perceiving them as a matter of symbolic power, which – precisely therefore – serves to reproduce their disprivileged position (see Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The class reproduction remains hidden and so it remains – not through brutality or persuasion, but simply through “the order of things” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 168). This force of “the order of things” – embodied in the class-distinctive habituses of the (dis)privileged males and habitually realised through their actions – thus appears to apply also to the supposedly disorderedly, fluid digital media, to which is sometimes ascribed the potential of bringing to an end the enduring inequalities of class. The results presented here suggest that digital media are appropriated in ways that rather serve to reproduce such inequalities. Hence, the assumed democratizing potentials of digital media seem to be unequally realised – even within the so-called digital generation.

ENDNOTES

1 In this article, the term digital media refers to personal computers, the internet, and/or the various forms of goods and practices which they enable.

2 The data were gathered through the first round of fieldwork of my ongoing PhD project. In the Swedish school system, upper secondary school (3 years, elective) is preceded by elementary school (9 years, compulsory). Though elective, almost all young Swedes today attend upper secondary school, normally at the age of 16. Some study programs are preparatory for higher education, others are vocationally-oriented.

3 In this article, the term computer games refers to the genres the informants engaged with, i.e. action, adventure, war, strategy and sports.

REFERENCES


