

In my secret life: Reflections on media life, learning, and research

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Peer-reviewed article

Citation: Hodbod', V. (2023). In my secret life: Reflections on media life, learning, and research. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 15(1), 72-84. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2023-15-1-6>

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Received: November 17, 2021

Accepted: January 5, 2022

Published: April 28, 2023

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a year-long ethnographic, phenomenologically hermeneutically oriented project of research and practical education that focused on a) the media experiences of adolescents aged 15-17, and b) nurturing adolescents' ability to reflect upon their lived media experiences. Autoethnography is used to illustrate a day in the life of a teacher and researcher who takes a holistic approach to media learning and to explore how self-reflection can enrich both students' lives and learning and professional research, in a mediatized world. The author reflects on his own media experiences and exposes an inner dialogue about the role media plays in his life. He questions things that are taken for granted, and reveals his approach to the use of self-reflection in research and educational practice. This article explores self-reflection as a long-term, comprehensive, sensitive, age-adapted approach to media education.

Keywords: *media experience, media learning, self-reflection, reflective media research.*



Journal of Media Literacy Education

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION (NAMLE)

Online at www.jmle.org

INTRODUCTION

I fumble at the edge of my bed for my smartphone and silence what I had thought was the most innocuous alarm sound I could have set the night before. I roll over and stare at the ceiling, but I grow frantic. I reach for my smartphone again and start my digital breakfast to see what is on the plate. I open my emails and quickly respond to the easy ones: “Hey, sure, I’ll be there!” “Let’s wait on this one.” “I’ll see you in an hour and we’ll decide.” Then I jump onto WhatsApp, although I don’t like chatting that much, to respond to several messages delivered overnight. My morning routine actually connects me to technology before I connect to myself. I often think I could start the new day differently, be more sensitive to my inner self, but instead of taking a brisk walk or even just stretching my body, I ignore those beneficial options. I put down the phone and get up, partly because I feel a pang of guilt, but mostly because I’m bored.

As soon as I am up, I move on to another medium. It’s still dark in the room, 6:30 a.m. on a Tuesday, but I can fire up my record player without looking. I can have a year’s subscription to almost all the music in the online archives, I don’t leave the choice up to Spotify or YouTube. I stand in front of my vinyl collection and decide what music I will play this morning.

“No, no, not this one... Yes!” I smile contentedly and pull out Leonard Cohen’s *Ten New Songs*, remastered onto 180-gram vinyl. Leonard Cohen recorded it after spending time in seclusion in a Zen monastery on Mount Baldy (Simmons, 2012). Pulling that record off the shelf and my body’s response to the music reminds me how it helped me deal with hidden feelings and frustrations at a vulnerable time in my life.

I saw you this morning
You were moving so fast
Can’t seem to loosen my grip
On the past
And I miss you so much
There’s no one in sight
And we’re still making love
In my secret life
(Cohen, 2001)

While I listen I think about what the day ahead. First, I will go to the private school, Naše Lyceum Praha, where every week I have a two-hour media education lesson with eight 15- and 16-year-old high school students. The pedagogy and curriculum there are based on contemporary pedagogical theories such as “social-

cognitive constructivism” (Krahenbuhl, 2016), “positive psychology” (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014), “nonviolent communication” (Rosenberg & Eisler, 2003), and “formative assessment” (William & Leahy, 2016). As a “teacher-researcher” (Alexakos, 2015), I deliver a course I designed while researching my doctoral dissertation. My school allowed me to devote the entire 2020–21 school year to facilitating students’ self-reflection on the media experiences they “have already had” (Dewey, 1938, p. 74), while nurturing and deepening their understanding of “the subjective role media play in their individual and collective lives” (Zezulkova, 2015, p. 168). Altogether, I have delivered 32 classes (20 online classes of 45 minutes each and 12 in-person classes of 90 minutes each) in the past year. I have had some time since then to analyze data and make initial findings, which I continue to build upon in this school year. Although I’d rather stay home and enjoy a nice cup of Pu-erh tea, I have to get moving and go to work.

As soon as I walk out of my flat and onto the sidewalk, I automatically pat my front and back pockets. I’ve got that move down pat; I do it several times a day automatically. My keys, smartphone and wallet are in the right place, so I can go. An app on my smartphone tells me that my bus leaves in ten minutes. As I put my phone back into my pocket, I forget the exact time I’ve just seen, so I pull it out again to double-check. I pick up my pace. My attention span tends to be short and I often act impulsively. However, I don’t have to remember information, I always have it on hand unless my smartphone’s battery runs out.

I see other people heading for the same bus stop as me. Along the way, I notice that someone has graffitied the words “Sparta 1893” on the wall of a house. Sparta is the most famous Czech football club and its stadium is near my flat. I can hear the fans’ joy of winning as well as their frustration with losing, which is sometimes followed by racist abuse of the players. As soon as I start thinking about that, snippets of the club’s anthem, which I’ve known since I was a kid wearing a Sparta jersey in our village far from Prague, start playing in my head. As I get older, I recognize more of the symbolism in the song: “Sing, Sparta’s fan, raise your voice! [...] Your club is everything [...]. Sparta is eternal [...]. Keep your heart in your hand.” Is any Sparta fan aware of the import of these symbols? How they create a sense of belonging or exacerbate extremist tendencies?

When I finally arrive at the bus stop, I see people huddled close together, thumbing their smartphones like

my grandmother praying the rosary. They gather there for the free Wi-Fi, not only for the bus.

The bus is full, so I stand all the way. My researcher's curiosity makes me look surreptitiously, and perhaps a little unethically, over the others' shoulders to see what they're doing on their phones. Aside from the usual social media posts and texts, some people are literally, or rather virtually, farming on their phones. Nowadays this online game is played by children, teenagers, adults, and seniors alike. Why do people enjoy growing carrots on their phones? I pull out my own smartphone and Google the question. It turns out it's really quite simple: mobile and computer games in which we take care of a farm (for example), are fundamentally different from strategy and action games. In the latter, there is tension, competition, a need for concentration and speed, and constant change. Games like FarmVille don't offer those rewards and demands, and that's why players like them. The game never ends, one takes care of something or someone, it's usually very slow and relaxing, and there is no winning or losing, no time limit, no enemy, and no diminishing health indicator. The game can be played at one's own pace. The very popular Euro Truck Simulator, for example, works on a similar principle and its players appreciate similar elements. As one Redditor said, "Well, I guess that about sums it up. Relaxing, a good way to kill some time. Maybe some things are no more complicated than that" (Reddit, 2015).

When I see teenagers in headphones hiding in their hoodies, see them waving, and hear my name being called, I know I am near our school. Once there, I have an hour and a half before class starts. I have prepared myself for today's class at home, so I open my computer, deal with a few emails, open a Word document, and sit down to write this article. Of course, I don't forget to put my favorite album by Hang Massive on my headphones.

Writing by music slows, calms, and anchors me amid the chaos of the school. The dust in me starts to settle. Before class, I have some time to write a few paragraphs and explain why I chose autoethnography as the subject of this article. I open Zotero and review the passages that support the theory behind what I want to explain.

I remember a perfectly ordinary morning when I pulled Carolyn Ellis's essay "Heartful Autoethnography" (Ellis, 1999) from a stack of other papers. And then, it was that fast. My body started pounding. I felt that now, finally, there was someone who understood me. I had hardly heard of autoethnography before. I had tucked it away somewhere on the "not scientific enough" shelf of

methods. I would be laughed at by the faculty for even considering using it. After reading Ellis's article, I wiped away a few tears, exhaled, and went to reflect upon why I had such a strong response to it.

Later, I read books like *Evocative Autoethnography* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), *Autoethnography* (Adams et al., 2015) and many others (Pelias, 2000; Bochner, 2012; Hodges, 2015) that made me feel "liberated, freer to speak" (Ellis, 2002, p. 401). They encouraged me that my story was worth telling too. As my initial euphoria condensed into calm conviction, I realized that through autoethnography I could directly and vividly illustrate how I think, live. I could explore my life "in media" (Deuze, 2013), media-related education, my teaching, and my dissertation research.

Personal experience ("auto") and description and interpretation ("graphy") of cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno") (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1) are the essence of autoethnography. Applying it to lived media experience was an ideal combination because autoethnography offers us a way to "bridge the academic and the affective by addressing the heart (the emotions, the sensory and physical aspects of experience, intuition, and values) and the head (the intellect, the knowledge, the analytical)" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 42) and understand media experiences that engage the "head, hands, heart and spirit" (Hobbs, 2016, p. 30) holistically. Autoethnography offered me a way to capture the nuanced and subjective complexity of the media experience and to connect "intimately and personally" with my personal media experiences (Adams et al. 2015, p. 22). Autoethnography offers the grounded, sensitive approach that is increasingly required in media experience research (Trültzsch-Wijnen, p. 2020) in contrast to more general, detached, and impersonal methods. Its approach is more about proximity, compassion, and tenderness than objectivity. Autoethnography values the individual's own experience and allows voices to be heard that might otherwise be "lost and disregarded" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 36). This will be shown in the following paragraphs as I take you directly to the classroom.

As soon as I see my teacher colleagues come into the lounge, returning data projectors to the shelf and heading for the coffee machine, my reverie ends. I have completely forgotten about the flow of time. My stomach tightens and starts to churn with mild nervousness. Class is about to start in a minute.

My media classes all have a similar structure. First students choose a topic based on their interests. They focus on the experiences "they already have" (Dewey,

1938, p. 74) with the selected topic or the particular media, their understanding of it, and what they like and dislike about it. We try to be respectful of each other during discussions because we have realized that media experiences are very personal. We often realize then that we have taken the selected topic for granted. Next, I select relevant theories (presented on a basic level), for example, the “SCARF” model (Rock, 2010), “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and “internet psychology” (Amichai-Hamburger, 2017). The students become familiar with these theories by reading and reflecting on their reading, or from my brief explanation of them. We discuss how we understand them. The journey from experience to theory is an essential part of students’ learning. It helps them expand upon and understand their experiences better, where before they have approached them from an intuitive, pre-reflective place. It also helps them to express things they have taken for granted. As Esther (age 16) once said: “These theoretical texts say what I kind of know anyway in a more intricate way. They make me feel like someone out there understands me.” Finally, after their pre-understanding is enriched by theory, students bring special mindfulness into their everyday life. They take time to reflect on their chosen topic in light of new understandings, things they have learned. They think about whether their everyday practice should change, and if so, how. These three steps, which complement and overlap each other, more “permanent” learning (Wiggins et al., 2005).

As I enter the classroom I say hello. Without another word, I start writing on the board. It takes me a few seconds and gives the students time to sit down and wonder about what’s going on. Their hallway conversations peter out and the class becomes quiet. A student, Lucas, begins to read the words on the blackboard aloud, syllable by syllable. I step back, leaving two questions behind:

1. We have discussed five social needs described by David Rock (2010): status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, fairness. How can social needs influence our media usage? And how can media usage influence our social needs?
2. Recall our lesson, “Family and Media” and reflect upon the following: What restrictions are placed on you at home regarding the media? What are your parents’ main concerns? Are they justified?

I give the students a minute to read the questions and ten minutes to decide which question they would like to answer. Although they will work in groups later, it is important that they first reflect by themselves and prepare for discussion. Self-reflection allows the students to drop their habitual patterns of thinking and behavior, to gradually develop a mindful attitude towards their lives, and to pursue an “ongoing conversation with one’s whole self about what one is experiencing as one is experiencing it. To be self-reflective is to engage in this meta-level of feeling and thought while being in the moment.” (Nagata 2004, p. 141). By “moving inward” (Ellis, 2002), students gain self-understanding and a more satisfying life. They critically and age-appropriately take responsibility for their lives and changing things for the better. By being learner-centric, and with self-reflection at its heart, this approach to learning extends beyond the school. It provides students with “something useful” that support “lifelong learning” (Laal & Salamati 2012). The students will acquire self-reflection as a key competency (OECD, 2019) in their lives. As everyone writes on a blank piece of paper for themselves it creates a pleasant atmosphere, which I interrupt after ten minutes with a new instruction:

Please finish the last sentence and put your pencil down so I know you’re done. WHEN I SAY, you will form groups of no more than four students, depending on the question with which you’ve chosen to work. Those who have addressed question one will go to the left, those who chose question two will go to the right. The goal of today’s lesson is to produce a poster displaying your answers to your question and present it to the class. All the materials you might find useful are in envelopes on my desk. I’m available for questions any time. NOW it’s time to go to your corners and form your groups. You have thirty seconds to do it.

I like the commotion as the students start pointing and shouting at each other and forming their groups. My students are already experienced in this way of working and they know exactly what to do. Group work is not always effective, although it is a very popular teaching method (Bennett, 2015). I respond to its various risks (student inactivity, students chatting among themselves rather than working, unequal amounts of work getting done, problems with assessment) by assigning students their roles in advance. Each of them has a task (one reads the materials, one writes down the results on paper, one moderates the discussion, one will present the final work to the class). I often assign group work when I am sure that the students have some previous knowledge of the topics being discussed and when exchanging their experiences will lead them to new perspectives and

deepen their understanding of their own lived experiences.

I go around the class observing each group at work. I listen to a group where students are applying the “SCARF” concept. SCARF is an acronym that Rock (2010) uses to describe five social needs. According to neuroscientists, when one of the social needs, such as the need for status, is threatened, the brain responds as it does when the body’s primary needs are threatened. One student, Martin (16), explains how he thinks his social needs and his media usage are interconnected:

It’s true that even though I don’t have anything to do with the football team, I still feel like I am a part of the team. I’m in that community, you know. I follow them on Instagram and on YouTube, I watch interviews, and I share their posts. I have a season ticket with my father [...]. Man, I really feel bad when they lose, and I’m happy when they win. It’s funny, why do I root for this team and not for any other? I never thought that being a fan might be connected to the need for relatedness.

The other students look surprised, but they probably know the same feelings. Martin makes me think about what watching football, playing the game, and being a football fan meant to me at his age. It was a relaxing, fun, easy to understand, and predictable activity in the otherwise chaotic, ever-changing world of adolescence. When I look at Martin, I think that at his age I would have loved to talk about football in class, or about anything else I was interested in and knowledgeable about. After a moment of silence, Elizabeth (16) takes the floor to share her experience from a different perspective.

I have so many thoughts running through my head. Of course the media fulfills our social needs. For me, the media are my “fixed point.” They help shape my image and my status, they help me connect with others and seek understanding from them. That’s why I follow people on social media, so I can identify with them. It makes me feel more accepted and it reassures me that I’m not alone. I want to be original, but I don’t want to be judged by my surroundings. I want to fit in, but I also want to be myself. I often feel like I’m at odds with myself and don’t really know who I am or what I want.

I can see that Elizabeth and Martin are a little bit upset, but that’s all right. This pedagogical approach is not meant to always be easy and enjoyable, or a quick-fix solution, but rather thorough-going and long-term. It rejects any communication hierarchy (e.g., teacher-student). It is not meant to “replace student’s perspectives with the perspectives of the authority, be that expert, scholar, critic, or teacher” but rather to teach students “how they can arrive at informed choices that

are most consistent with their own values” (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 8). Naturally, it is meant to connect the students’ “in-school and out-of-school” lives (Ito et al., 2013) and their “spaces” (Potter & McDougall, 2017). It takes their lived media experiences seriously, not as a threat or obstacle, but rather as an aspect of life that the student can better understand through self-reflection. Therefore, there is nothing surprising about Elizabeth and Martin being a bit taken aback by their reflection on their question. Reflection “is an active process of exploration and discovery which often leads to very unexpected outcomes” (Boud et al., 1985, p. 7).

I do not interrupt or comfort the students. I stay quiet, I try to be subtle, I try to “really listen” (Ellis 2002, p. 400). If something needs to be added, I don’t judge by giving “yes, but” responses. Rather I try to create space with “yes, and” responses (ibid.). Elizabeth’s reaction reminds me that when I was studying, teachers talked about a lot of issues, but not the ones that most interested me. I realize how many interesting topics Elizabeth and Martin can talk about related to their life period and their adolescent development. (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). They include things such as fans and media, communities, the formation of identity, and conflicts between external demands and internal voices. I recall how when I was a student, I wanted to share my experiences in class. I was curious about how adults like my teacher experienced similar issues. Now I am trying to create for my students a safe environment for sharing. By opening up about my own experiences, I try to reduce the generational and power gap between teacher and student. Normally, I would challenge Martin and Elizabeth to develop their line of reasoning and reach a concept or connection which I feel is important, but today that isn’t necessary. I can see that their reflection has already guided them to concepts that are meaningful to them. I have plenty of time to repeat the process during the year and deepen their ability to reflect. Once I find out that things are going well in this group, I join the other one.

The other group is discussing the restrictions that are placed upon them at home regarding the media they use. I watch as they list their parents’ concerns, make fun of them, and then come up with counterarguments. Patrik (15), one of the students who spends quite a bit of time playing computer games, explains:

What I hear most often from my parents is that I’m an addict. Arguing with them is like talking to a wall. When I’m playing on the computer, my parents don’t understand that I’m trying to win. They’ll come into my room and yell at me that I should be doing something more meaningful. They don’t understand that. I think

of it as e-sport and I want to win just like I do outside on the football field.

Eva (15), a multi-talented student with some of the best academic results in the class, agrees with Patrick:

Exactly, I'm the same way! When my parents come in and see me on electronic media doing something other than schoolwork, they get all horrified and say things like, "You were such a creative person, and now look how you turned out," or "put the phone away immediately!" If I did miss school or didn't go out, I might understand, but I do it all! I always go to school, and I go out four times a week. I bake and cook from time to time, but I just like to relax with electronics!

Eva takes a deep breath, exhales, realizes she's a little worked up, and adds:

Mostly they have something to say, but they don't set an example for me either. They are on the computer for three hours a day and they're annoyed they can't handle it. When I talk to them, they don't listen to me at all because they are immersed in the internet. They're just as addicted. I think we're similar.

Everyone in the group smiles and agrees. I observe how passionately the students talk about their experiences with the media, and how they are bothered by protective actions and paternalistic claims about what is good for them in the context of their media use. And it bothers me too. Yes, from a certain perspective, parents may see that their child is "always on the phone," but they are impoverishing themselves by overlooking the benefits of the media experience, such as socialization, relaxation, entertainment, connecting with others, and feeling safe (Woodfall & Zezulcova, 2016). That is why I am trying to create a space where students can explore and share their authentic media lives. That is also why my pedagogical technique approaches the students and their media experiences holistically. The traditional emphasis on student's rational capacities is balanced and complemented by an emphasis on intuition, the heart, "embodied experiences" (Kuzmičová et al., 2022), feelings, and emotions. This approach tries to utilize all the components of our being — the "whole self" (Jung et al., 1964, p. 60). All the components are equally important in the process of transforming students' lived experience with media into useful knowledge.

I imagine how Eva, in the longer term, might be able to argue to her parents, teachers, and even researchers that they can't treat her experiences with her smartphone "in isolation" from other aspects of her life (Lemish, 2015, p. 2). I also imagine that given more time and support, Patrick could explore the various nooks and

crannies of the games industry in the context of his own gaming experience, allowing him to understand it more fully. I have observed that children and adolescents are well versed in their own experiences and understand them to a large extent. Therefore, I ask myself why adults tend to shut down and limit these experiences rather than being keen on understanding them for themselves. When we ignore what adolescents "really" experience, we deprive ourselves of the chance to help them climb "the ladder of online opportunities" (Livingstone, 2019, p. 12) and take full advantage of what might be waiting for them there (Jenkins, 2009; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). Also, because of the fluidity and constant evolution of media life, a more open approach transcends traditional notions of literacy as a static set of knowledge and skills, perceiving it as a "dynamic" (Cannon et al., 2018) or simply as "living" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020).

Once the students begin to present the group what they have come up with during their group work, I smile contentedly. The students reward each other with applause. I remember how weird it felt at the start to ask them about their media lives, how I feared it was too personal, too taboo. I marvel at how naturally they speak about them now. Normally, at the end of a lesson I reflect with the students about what they are taking away from it, but this time I surprise them by asking how they view the reflective approach itself: "Please open your reflective journal and think about the following question: If you had to name one thing you are taking away from our classes, what would it be?" I want them to reflect on what my approach brings to them and what its limitations are, so that together we can better address and adapt it to their needs, their changing media experiences, and their changing lives.

As the end of the class is fast approaching, I give the students a few minutes to prepare. Fortunately — this time — no one tries to be funny by shouting "nothing at all." As I see students gradually put down their pens, I give the floor to Caroline (16), who wants to speak first. "I feel like someone is listening to me and I can be honest with myself during these reflections." I tactfully nod my head at Caroline and thank her. "I see it a little bit differently," Martin (16) exclaims. I am surprised it's Martin who is reporting, because he hardly ever speaks in front of the class. "I think I've begun to see the media where others don't." There is silence in the classroom. The students first raise their eyebrows and wonder what Martin means. Then they turn to Martin and nod in agreement, indicating that they are experiencing the same thing. I feel like patting Martin on the back but I

just thank him and bring the class to a close: “Well done. Thank you, Martin, and thank you all for your excellent job today. Class is now over. No homework, see you next week.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and look at my students with gratitude. In the long run, I take many things away from these classes, such as a better understanding my own media experiences gained from my review of my students’ written reflections. Max Van Manen (2016) describes my feelings as “having hope for children” (p. 109), which he sees as the essence of the teaching experience. Van Manen’s quotation has appeared to me exactly at the right moment. As the next hour’s teacher is coming into the classroom, I quickly pack my things and leave the class. And since I have no other obligations at school, I can go back home.

After I get home from school, I need a little break before I start working on this article again. So I take a nap, go for a short run, take a cold shower and with hot tea sit back to this article. I can’t help but feel like there’s just a little bit left to finish. I reread and rewrite, deleting, editing, and switching paragraphs. It is a strategy for delaying starting on the self-disclosure part.

The idea for this research and educational project did not come out of the blue. On the contrary, it was the natural result of the situation in which I found myself in a certain period of my life. Before I started teaching and working on my PhD,¹ I worked at a tech start-up. After five years I experienced burnout, which may sound like a corny song: “another young man overworked himself and quit before he started.” For me it was the beginning a personal transformation. I can see myself standing on Lazarská Street in Prague, shaking with fear, and openly crying with exhaustion and relief after sending a message via Slack to my boss that I was quitting my job. Until this moment I hadn’t found it strange to spend ten hours a day on the computer. I wasn’t paying attention to the calls for help my body was sending me in the form of back pain and digestive disorders. I didn’t find anything worrisome about my increasing social anxiety and mood swings. I repaid my girlfriend’s support and solid backing with verbal abuse and humiliation. Little did I know that this was the beginning of a challenging and rather painful “detour” (Cappelo, 2016, p. 121) that was essential for me to recognize the role of media in peoples’ lives and in society. Initially, I blamed this

personal failure mainly on the media. In particular, I felt that the media had created and perpetuated in me an illusion that I wasn’t aware of. The recognition of this influence was accompanied by a certain shock and shame. Why had I been so blind and dumb? It was as if a friend who had been there all along suddenly disappeared without warning, leaving a crack through which sober realization came.

I realized that I wasn’t handling the media in a way that allowed me to live well and happily. I simply didn’t understand why I was using certain media, and I didn’t know how to change my habits. Somewhere inside me, I knew that I would like to live differently, and more happily, with the media. But I was on my own. I needed help, but I didn’t have anyone I could talk to. Actually, where was I supposed to look for help? Friends? University teachers? My parents? When I couldn’t find sympathy, I intuitively started my own “mindful inquiry” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) into my media life. Self-reflection seemed to me the most intuitive and accessible path, so I began to reflect on my own media experiences, primarily through writing.

Self-reflection is a repetitious, somewhat mysterious process. It helped me to understand my media experiences “in deeper ways” (Mortari, 2015) and in general inspired an “awake stance about [my] lived experiences” (ibid., p. 1). As I was becoming aware of how media intruded with varying intensity into all aspects of my everyday life (Livingstone, 2009), my media life turned out to be more “messy, uncertain, and emotional” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 9) than I had initially thought. Where I had initially been angry at the media for stealing a piece of my life, and felt that I had been deceived by it, I increasingly began to notice the “nuanced” and “specific” (ibid., p. 21) aspects of my media experiences. As I began to discover my needs, my uniqueness, my tucked-away memories, and my desires, I gradually began to recognize that the media were only a part of my total experiences. But to varying degrees it was an aspect of working, maintaining and sustaining relationships, walking and navigating the city, dressing myself, and thinking of my future. In sum, it was part of how I perceived myself.

As I was re-writing and re-reading my work, I was trying to figure out what I needed to do and how to live better, perhaps even more “ethically” (Bochner & Ellis,

reflection is meant to be a springboard for more general insight into the media experience of adolescents and the encouragement of self-reflection in media education.

¹ It is necessary to clarify that the methodology I used in my dissertation, as discussed below, is phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented action research. My autoethnographic writing, first-hand experience, and self-

2016, p. 147) in my “deeply mediatized” life (Hepp, 2019). This gradually led me into “digital detox” (Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). I had to relearn how to walk without a smartphone in my hand, as I did when I was a child. I stopped all my social network activity and exchanged my smartphone for an old-style phone without internet connection, so I could gain distance, take a breath, and look at all that was happening to me. Awkwardly, I experimented by trial and error and found out how to live with the media more happily. My digital disconnection was followed by a re-connection. I realized that there is no such thing as a “media-free” life. There can only be conscious, critical, and never-ending reflection and acceptance of the media as a necessary part of my life. I began to observe people and the media with a particular personal interest and curiosity, applying a “critical eye, an eye that’s always assessing, always deciding questions of worth, always saying what is good or bad” (Pelias, 2000, p. 220).

This challenging and emotionally draining process was full of self-doubt and necessary, but not always pleasant self-knowledge. My reflection on my media experiences was truly meaningful and began to bear fruit. It was accompanied by a “growing feeling of personal autonomy” (Pagis, 2009, p. 277). I started to notice that better understanding of myself and the media meant better understanding of others (Ellis, 1999, p. 672). It allowed me to make better decisions about the media I used. Recognizing and limiting my illusions allowed me to see my life and the life around me in a deeper, albeit not easier, context.

Empowered by my lived, reflective, and ultimately transformative experience, I realized that I could learn about media in a more sensitive way — in the context of who I am. My new way of learning was very rewarding, although intentionally positioning myself at the center of my inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998) began to seem embarrassingly and dangerously self-centered. On the other hand, it allowed me to realize its potential for the transformation and education of others. My self-reflective journey was “guided by [...] ideas, feelings, experiences, and questions” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 26) about my own mediatized life. Attempting to understand myself in contemporary society proved to be a valid and relevant method for researching the media experience in all its complexity. It also inspired a pedagogical approach based on self-reflection. Embracing my “vulnerability to open myself up to criticism about how [I] lived” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 68) finally succeeded. I felt that collectively experienced self-disclosure would (at least for my generation) beneficially disrupt the

silence about the role media plays in our lives. Furthermore, I felt that my vulnerability would allow me to plant the seed of a holistic, comprehensive, long-term, age-adapted, sensitive approach to media education that many people “yearn for” (Mihailidis, 2020, p. 528). I am continuing to research that pedagogical approach alongside media experiences themselves.

I was lost and confused at the beginning of my research. When I tried to teach media education, I constantly faced high demands for an ideal, functional media education, one with a “comprehensive, systematic and sustained” approach (Buckingham, 2019, p. 3) — a media education that would help anyone of any age navigate the “ubiquitous and ever encompassing media ecosystem, to take advantage of its opportunities while minimizing its harms, and to do so critically and creatively” (Mihailidis, 2020, p. 526). One that would take an interdisciplinary approach to our highly individual (Hobbs et al., 2016), ever-changing, multi-layered media lives, “in [all their] complexity” (Storm-Mathisen, 2016, p. 82).

There was a fairly decent theoretical consensus among leading scholars about appropriate and effective media education, or at least a consensus about its pitfalls (Hobbs, 2010). I lacked an idea that could help me week-by-week, year-by-year to meet those high demands. Apart from short-term or thematic approaches to media education, I had not been able to find one that did so. I knew I could easily spend four years working with students, meeting weekly in the classroom. I was looking for an approach that would have a connecting line over time, one that would enrich my students’ lives. More importantly, it should be adaptable to both the ever-changing media and the dynamic stages of adolescence. I therefore decided to build my approach not so much on knowledge about the media but on the skill of self-reflection. The environment around us, the media, and our opportunities may change, but the ability to meaningfully reflect on issues will always be important.

I later delved deeper into the literature and discovered an article by my supervisor and her colleague on phenomenology in media experience research and pedagogy. It talked about the role children attribute to the media (Woodfall & Zezulkova, 2016) and Van Manen’s book *Researching Lived Experience* (2016). I realized that the intellectual traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004) offer a good, human-centered way to research students’ lived experiences and the continuity, long-term effectiveness, and age-adaptability of

pedagogical techniques. “Most of our cognitive life happens without us being aware of it” (Mortarti, 2015, p. 2) and phenomenology “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences”. It asks “what is this or that kind of experience like” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 9).

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, is “becoming a theory of understanding in general” (Pokorný, 2008). The combination of phenomenology and hermeneutics puts adolescents at the center of research and education and allows them to participate in its design and influence its scope (Flewitt et al., 2018). This combined approach primarily involves writing activities. Adolescents translate their intuitively lived experience with media (listening to music, using a smartphone, etc.) into a written text.² Because the “natural tendency of the mind is unreflective” (Mortarti 2015, p. 2), writing down their reflections is developmental and revelatory for adolescents as they consciously think about things they have taken for granted. They can continue to work with their tangible output on paper, re-write it and re-interpret it. That way, adolescents can “dispense with [...] taking for granted and strive for a phenomenological attitude in which the phenomenon [chosen media experience] is allowed to appear to the mind in its meaning structure” (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004, p. 146). The goal of this kind of research and pedagogy is not to find one general theory or answer “with which we can explain and/or control the world.” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 9). It is more to offer “the possibility of plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 9).

I finish writing the above paragraph. I can’t continue because of its complexity and my fragility. I question whether I should even write about such theories. I check my e-mail, skip from one song after another, get up from the table to refill my tea, until I am disturbed by the ringing of my phone. A friend invites me to join some former classmates for a glass of wine. She says that the invitation was sent via Facebook Messenger, but since I’m not in the group there, she decided to call. I’m flattered that she hasn’t forgotten me and made this old-fashioned telephone call out of the blue.

When we later meet, I realize that the media is an essential component of the whole evening and our conversations. My friends show me their “soon to be

three” photos from their Instagram profiles. Meanwhile, I subtly check which girls have an engagement ring. The big news items are soon replaced by talk about must-see TV series, movies, upcoming exhibitions, concerts, and “really interesting” books. It’s hard to know which of those events are worthwhile because the speakers have spent a lot of time on them and wouldn’t want to admit that they were wasting their time. We also debate current political and cultural affairs. The exact source of information doesn’t matter, but it is obvious that media is shaping our opinions. Without realizing it, most of our opinions come from what we have seen or heard — if not directly from the media, then from our mediatized parents or friends. Similarly, the way we describe our lives is deeply mediatized. Those who are still single see their lives as incomplete or even unsuccessful because the message is that they should be married. Those who are raising children are insecure about whether they raising them properly, because mediatized information is constantly interfering and influencing and reshaping itself. They can never be sure that what they know now will not be challenged tomorrow. “In the conditions of modernity, no knowledge is knowledge in the old sense, where to know is to be certain” (Giddens, 1990, p. 41). That’s not all. Most of my friends work in the media industry as journalists, developers, or marketing consultants. As their intake of alcohol increases, they often start to complain about the nature of “media work” (Deuze, 2007). I remember this feeling from my past. I still feel kind of wounded by my previous media work experience and I just listen to them humbly and nod. I don’t comfort them. I stay quiet. I try to “really listen” (Ellis, 2002, p. 400). If I feel a need to add something to the conversation, I do not judge with “yes, but” responses, but rather try to create more space by giving “yes, and” responses (ibid.). Wait [...] didn’t I already write the same words above? Yes. That means I’m tired. I find myself yawning. I am becoming more sensitive to the harsh light and noise in the pub, I know I’m supposed to get some rest. As usual, after one or two glasses of wine I am the first to leave. I enjoy the leisurely walk back home. Looking up at the sky I take a deep breath. I realize with a sigh of relief how many different sensations I experienced today and that I only learn from their sheer volume.

² The adolescents know from the start that writing is part of the research. The research methodology is repeatedly explained to them, and they sign a consent form. They know that I will read their written reflections and process them anonymously. It is a

rule that they only share what they want. They can freely write for themselves, but only give me what they want me to read or share in class.

As soon as I get home, I decide whether to go straight to bed or to open the computer and finish this article. Its conclusion should be a creative unpacking and the denouement of this autoethnographic text. It is the hardest part and it has to come on its own when it is ready. I don't know how to put a period on this text. Have you had the same experience, when you do not get what you strive for in life but what you let go spontaneously falls into your lap? I often do, but this time I can't stand to wait. I open the computer, stare dully for the umpteenth time at this article, waiting unchanged for me on Google Drive. I read it over again, add some sentences and rewrite others. It's futile, though. I shut the computer and go to bed without finishing.

As I lie in bed I finally give up. As much as I want bring this autoethnography to an exciting close, to a denouement where it all makes rational sense, I have to admit that there is a distinct difference between what my head and my heart say. I'm at the crossroads, and I will proceed more intuitively. The heart usually doesn't lie, it's just that I don't have the courage to answer. I have to humbly learn from my heart and timidly follow.

While I don't bring much good news at the end, this conclusion will be true to life — that is, full of doubt and questions without a satisfying, general, transferable answer. The only thing I am left with is a nagging feeling.

Self-reflection on my own media experience has not made my life easier. It has brought me the humble self-discovery. It points to deeply hidden sadness and anger, cowardice, and fear. I have realized that the media is often a protective shield for me, a place of safety to which I retreat when I do not know what to do without it. Self-reflection shines a light on how media can create false needs in people, something to which I myself have repeatedly fallen prey. Self-reflection on my own media experiences at first took me on a painful “detour” (Cappello, 2016, p. 121) and left an ugly mark.

The question is: do I want to continue to teach self-reflection in school and guide students in how to use it, knowing how much pain it can bring? Self-reflection often leads to “unexpected outcomes” (Boud et al., 1985, p. 7) over which I have no control. Sooner or later my students will burst through the backdrop like the protagonist of *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998). They will come to many unexpected realizations, and have no choice but to embrace the media, make peace with it, and learn to take advantage of the myriad opportunities of a fully mediatized life.

Although I feel bruised, I have no choice but to acknowledge that briefly liberating myself from dependence on the media was worth it. I awakened from ignorance, overcame apathy, gained an ability to choose media more consciously, and enjoyed them more and without regrets. Self-reflection on my media experience proved essential to my orienting and navigating (Bentz & Shapiro, 1988, p. 4) in a fully mediatized life and culture. I understood and accepted that “to learn is to face transformation” (Palmer 1983, p. 40) and experienced for myself how self-reflection transformed my perception of reality and showed me alternative ways of being in the world. Then I accepted that while I am not offering my students a quick fix for their media problems, I do offer them a meaningful, long-term solution.

It makes sense to develop and research the self-reflective approach because it creates a space “in which the community of truth is practiced” (ibid., xii). In other words, it opens up and develops a dialogue about our lives in media. It is sensitive to students' specificities and diversity, open to experimentation, inclusive by nature, and constantly “seeks a response” from those involved (Adams et al., 2015, p. 26).

I wonder what was going through your mind while you read this article? What media experiences jumped out at you, which you'd like to understand better? Did it bring anything new to the way you research the media and people's responses to it? What would you have written differently?

I catch myself smiling when I realize that I can implement these same questions I've posed to you and bring them to life in a project for my students. I look forward to seeing tomorrow morning how they will address them and how mindfully they will reflect on their mediatized lives. Hopefully, they will draw upon the self-reflection skills and the knowledge they have gained from me so far and will be willing to reveal themselves even more. Perhaps they will add something unique of themselves, in spite of feelings of vulnerability.

I don't know how long I have been lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, resisting the temptation to get up and write down what is running through my head. But I have straightened out my thoughts. I rejoice that I have finally finished this article, at least in my thoughts. Fortunately, I don't get out of bed. Because to write down what I want, the way I want, there are still a few long nights of self-reflection ahead. I know the way I want to go, though. Around the time the old day breaks into the new one, I finally fall asleep.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot express the gratitude that belongs to the two sublime women behind the creation of this article. First with apologies and thanks to Karolina, and then to Dr. Marketa Supa, for her guidance, endless patience, understanding, valuable advice, and most of all for giving me the courage to write and finish this article.

The research was consulted in advance and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. The work was supported by the grant SVV - 260 598.

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