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The media habits of young people in Sweden: The use of fictional texts in school and recreational contexts

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Abstract
This article is based on a questionnaire study of the media habits of Swedish youth aged 17–18. It examines the time they spend on using fictional texts through various media forms as well as in relation to mode (production/consumption), context (spare time/school), and gender (male/female). It further analyses these media habits and, using media ecology theory, discusses their effects on the learning process. The study shows that the participants spend more time using fictional texts, predominantly through audio-visual media forms, in their leisure time than in school, that they consume more fictional texts than they produce, and that the female participants spend more time producing fictional texts than the male participants – a result that is coloured by the amount of time they spend blogging, tweeting and writing diaries. The effects of such life-writings on teaching and learning processes, as well as on school performances are also discussed.

Keywords: media habits, media ecology, narrative, multimodal media, blog

Introduction
In a multimodal media society that offers narratives in various forms such as novels, poems, movies, TV series, computer games, console games and music, fictional texts are in circulation and have a great impact, specifically among young people who are mass consumers of these texts (Medierådet, 2008; Medierådet, 2010). Does an increase in accessibility also entail an increase in young people’s narrative consumption and production? Recent changes in the media environment have made new features prominent, for example multimodality. At the same time, demands for new competencies, such as the ability to transform semiotic systems and languages, are required from users (readers, writers, players etc.).

Several researchers have shown how new media forms are thoroughly altering the conditions for communication (Fairclough 1995; Kress 2003). These alterations, one may assume, might also be true for fictional texts. Although these texts are considered highly important for the way people interpret their surroundings and make their lives meaningful (Bruner 2002), this research field has large gaps concerning how people use and create fictional texts today as part of their meaning-making processes.
The young generation, made up of “digital natives” (Prensky 2001), is familiar with using narratives in various media forms and has a new approach to cultural productions (Olin-Scheller 2006). They constantly share information with each other and the focus is as often on social relations as it is on the text itself when they blog, write fan fiction or play computer games in textual universes (Lundström and Olin-Scheller 2010). Therefore, it is relevant to study how much time Swedish youth spend on using fictional texts and participating in various text-universes.

Leisure-time activities have an impact on schoolwork; in particular, reading books as a form of recreation results in increased reading competence at school (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding 1988, 285; Lao and Krashen 2000, 268). In light of this, it is useful to study in which contexts young people participate in text-universes as well as which media forms they use as they do so. The success cycle, the idea that the student who is encouraged to read a book in school is likely to continue reading it outside of school, and the student who reads in his/her recreational time achieves better results in school (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding 1988, 285), is another reason it is necessary to study young people’s recreation consumption and production in relation to their use of fictional texts as part of their schoolwork, and as a means to gain an understanding of the use of literature in a school context.

This study explores how much time young people in Swedish at upper secondary school level (estimate that they) spend on using fictional texts through various media forms. The aim is to find out which media forms are used the most in a Swedish context and how the time between mode (production/consumption), context (recreation/school), and gender (male/female) is distributed. A media ecological theoretical framework will be applied when discussing the results in order to highlight significant aspects. I will base this study on the following three questions: 1) How much time do the participants spend on consuming and producing fictional texts in their recreational time and as part of their schoolwork? 2) Through which media forms do they use fictional texts? 3) Are there any differences along gender lines in the media forms used by the participants?

**Background: A widened text concept and narrative competence**

Stories are narrative units that have various functions. Historically, storytelling has been used for, among other things, cultural maintenance and educational purposes. According to Abrahamson (1998, 440), it is “the only tool available by which individuals within their communities could preserve and share their heritage. Stories not only explained life and preserved history, but also ensured the continuity of experiences from one generation to the next”. As a means to maintain cultural traditions and educate people, stories and storytelling have been powerful tools. Today, there are many ways people come into contact with stories such as printed (or typographic) texts (novels, short stories, poems, plays, comic books/manga etc.), visual texts (movies, TV series, plays, fan films, paintings and photos etc.),
audial texts (audiobooks, musical performances, music etc.) and electronic texts (novels, fan fiction and computer games etc.). Often, stories belong to more than one of these categories. Many stories are web-based, interactive and/or multimodal in one way or another. In a study of literature teaching and learning in Swedish schools that focuses on ‘new’ media forms, Olin-Scheller (2008, 78–79) explains that one of her participants claimed that, as long as the story is meaningful and relevant to him, it does not matter whether the story is told in the form of a novel, a movie, a computer game or a role play. For him, and possibly for many other young people who are familiar with various media forms and thus experience stories in several different ways, the story and its theme(s) are regarded as the primary focus while the actual medium through which the story is told is secondary.

As a powerful tool for identity-creation processes, storytelling can be a significant part of the educational environment where subjects in which literature is a prominent feature such as comparative literature and language studies contribute to students’ social and cultural competencies (Jameson 1991; Bruner 2002; Nussbaum 2010). Fictional texts have a great impact on children’s ability to develop an understanding of themselves; their individual identities as well as their development into cultural beings who participate in a collective identity (Thorson and Ekholm 2009, 9). Thus, through stories and storytelling children learn to understand and respect themselves and others. Fictional texts function as a tool to learn tolerance and gain an increased awareness of other people and their situations (ibid.). In addition, stories and storytelling make important contributions to students’ learning processes. Not only do they improve their language and communication skills, but they also develop their critical and creative thinking (Collins and Cooper 1997) and, as O’Neill (2004) points out, imaginative children also tend to be better at maths. The impact of storytelling thus expands outside of the humanities discipline.

In a Swedish educational environment, ‘the wider text concept’ was incorporated into the steering documents for upper secondary schools in 1994, Lpf 94, in order to add visual and audial texts to the already established category of printed texts (Skolverket 1994). In the year 2000, this widened aspect of text was further emphasised in all school subjects so that the education system followed developments in the surrounding society where texts in numerous media forms were influencing the students (Skolverket. Ett vidgat textbegrepp). It was thus regarded as desirable for students to acquire a generic media competence, so-called media literacy (ibid.). In the recently developed steering documents for upper secondary schools, the wider text concept is replaced by the more generic word “text” for the subject of Swedish as it is specified that students should use fictional and non-fictional texts of various kinds and media forms to learn about his/her surroundings, his/her fellow beings and about him/herself (Skolverket 2011, 160). It is thus stated that students should encounter stories through several media forms as part of their school subject of Swedish.
In their study about writing practices and communicative competence in Swedish schools, Elmfeldt and Erixon (2007, 62) discuss the competence Swedish youth gains from using a range of texts, not strictly fictional texts. Borrowing a concept from Livingstone, they find there is a tendency towards an expanding visual “screen entertainment culture” that fuses a variety of media forms and, at the same time, requires advanced technological equipment. Printed texts, which have thus far dominated classrooms, are now being threatened by the on-going media cultural changes in society where the private sphere seems to open into the public sphere (Elmfeldt and Erixon 2007, 65). One effect of applying a widened text concept is that students obtain a different view on reading and writing, and that the kinds of texts they acquire through using a diverse range of media forms contribute to the development of their communicative competence (ibid. pp. 206–07).

Continuing on the theme of the fusion of the private and public spheres, as he discusses the informal and formal competence young people gain from their various text-related activities inside and outside of school, Teleman (1997, 60, [my translation]) emphasises the danger he sees in schools’ ambition to imitate a recreational context which might lead to an “intimatisation of the language of the public sphere”. Thus, he argues for schools to provide students with a chance to conquer the language of the public sphere.

One characteristic of today’s media environment is its changeability where new techniques enable new forms of media consumption (Livingstone 2002). This is also true regarding how fictional texts are created and used (Jenkins 2006; Elmfeldt and Erixon 2007). Another characteristic is interactivity where the demand for participation together with increased complexity requires a high level of analytical competence from the users (Jenkins 2006). This competence is not only text-related because it also involves the social and collective aspects of analytical competencies that are prominent in meaning-making processes (ibid.).

The media habits of young people in Sweden have been the focal point of several studies conducted by the Swedish Media Council, although they do not focus predominantly on fictional texts as the present study does, (e.g. Linderoth and Olsson 2010), and media habits are also prominent in other studies (e.g. Olin-Scheller 2008; Alexandersson and Hansson 2011). One study conducted by Graffman and Fredriksson (2010) for the Swedish Media Council focuses on the interaction of children and teenagers with and around the TV show Swedish Idol. Based on the results of their study, they find that media function as cultural expressions that mediate social relations (ibid. p. 17). The interactive and participatory aspects are regarded as more important than the actual content of the show. They explain that it was very important for the young people who took part in the study to maintain their social relations and to be continuously updated on what was going on in each other’s lives. As opposed to Olin-Scheller’s study which revealed that the participants deem
the story (the content) to be more significant than the medium through which it is
told (the form), Graffman and Fredriksson’s study reveals that the participants
prioritise the interactivity (the form) over the show (the content). There is of course
a big difference which might explain this discrepancy, namely that Olin-Scheller’s
study concentrates on stories while Graffman and Fredriksson’s study focuses on a
reality show without a clear narrative plot.

A recent report by the Swedish government entitled The Culture of Reading [my
translation] (SOU 2012, 11) looks at on the status of reading in present-day Sweden.
The group selected by the government to conduct the study and the ensuing report
was tasked with analysing the status of literature in Sweden today and identifying
emerging trends expected to influence the field of literature in the future. The group
found that the reading habits of the Swedish population have a high level of stability.
However, they also expressed concerns about threats to the high status held by
literature today (ibid.). The biggest threat is the falling reading competence among
the younger generations, with clear evidence supporting this (ibid.). There are also
big gaps between the reading habits of people belonging to different socio-economic
groups. As a result of the drop in reading competence among young people, a large
section of this group has a limited ability to understand and comprehend texts,
which also affects their reading experiences, a problem that is most noticeable
among boys (ibid.).

With this current status of literature and particularly the culture of reading
in mind, it is useful to study how much time Swedish youth spend consuming and
producing fictional texts (not only reading activities). It is relevant to distinguish
between consumption and production since these activities, although part of the
same process of constructing and making sense of a text, activate different structural
processes (Langer and Flihan 2000, n. pag.). In addition, these are emphasised as
different learning skills in the most recent steering document for upper secondary
schools which states that education in the subject of Swedish should aim “to give the
students numerous opportunities to speak, write, read and listen” (Skolverket 2011,
160), and there is a focus on both production, such as “oral and written proficiency”,
and consumption, such as “using fictional and other types of texts, as well as film and
other media as a source of self-awareness and to gain awareness of other people’s
experiences, life conditions, thoughts and imaginary worlds” (ibid. [my translation]).
The reference to a variety of media in the steering document also hints at the sig-
nificance of analysing how much time young people in Sweden spend on fictional texts
using different media forms. Since there are differences between socio-economic
groups, it is particularly significant to study the recreational use of fictional texts and
their function as part of schoolwork even though the socio-economic status of the
participants was not the target of investigation of the present study. The report also
reveals that the decreasing reading competence is most noticeable among boys so it is
equally significant to examine whether there is a difference between males and females when it comes to media habits and, if so, how this difference is manifested.

The study presented in this article examines teenagers’ media habits with a focus on the difference between narratives as experienced in school and as a form of recreation. It is important to study the media habits of Swedish youth from an educational perspective. Although the use of fictional texts in educational situations is a well-researched area (e.g. Olin-Scheller 2006; Bergman 2007; Lundström 2007), there are huge gaps in the existing research about the relationship between using fictional texts as recreation and as schoolwork even though fictional text makes up a significant part of the meaning-making processes in both of these contexts.

Method: A survey study
This study is based on a questionnaire given to students in the second year of upper secondary school. Because the aim of the study is to make a survey and reach a relatively large number of participants, a questionnaire was regarded the most appropriate method for gathering the required information.

Participants
The questionnaire was distributed among students in their second year of upper secondary school in three schools in two cities in northern Sweden. The study was conducted in classes taught by teachers who had responded to an initial inquiry for participants. The questionnaire was not aimed at students in a particular programme, but was distributed among students attending theory-based programmes such as the Social Science Programme and the Technology Programme, as well as practice-based programmes like the Art, Music and Drama Programme and the Vehicle and Transport Programme. Selecting participants in the second year of upper secondary school, which means they were 17 to 18 years of age, was a strategic choice for a couple of reasons. First, they were regarded as old enough to take responsibility for selecting how much time they spend on fictional texts as opposed to younger children where the parents were expected to have control over how their children spend their spare time. Second, the second year was chosen with the idea that (most of) the students would be in the same schools for another year so they could be reached for any follow-up questions.

Instruments and procedure
The questionnaire was constructed in Swedish and consists of six questions that were answered in writing. In all, 314 questionnaires were gathered and formed the basis of the result. In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to estimate how much time they spend on narratives as consumed and/or produced through various media forms both as recreation (voluntary activity) “at home”, and as schoolwork (involuntary activity) “in school”. Homework, for example, counted as schoolwork
even if it was produced at home. In the instructions for the questionnaire, fictional texts were defined as predominantly imaginative narratives that have a story and a plot. As an example of the difference between fictional and non-fictional texts, novels, movies, music lyrics and computer games were contrasted with TV news and articles. The students were specifically instructed to answer how much time they spend on stories and storytelling through various media forms and not how much time they read, watch TV, play games etc. In order to keep the focus on narratives, a vast selection of media forms was given: printed texts, audio books, comics/manga, music, film, TV series, theatre, fan fiction, fan film, blog/Twitter/diary, computer games/console games, role play and lyrics. These forms can be questioned and criticised, but the reason for using them was to give as many forms as possible through which stories occur while space was also given to add any other media forms.

The multiple activities were divided into the two categories of production (e.g. writing lyrics and performing a play) and consumption (e.g. listening to music and watching a play) in order to be able to compare the two modes of using fictional texts, even though many of these activities are interactive to some extent. Production and consumption activate different learning abilities which is why this particular difference is emphasised in the present study. In addition, in order to see if there is a difference between the male and female participants’ media habits, gender was taken into account when analysing the questionnaires.

The fact that the participants were asked to estimate how much time they spend on each activity could be problematic since they might have been over-exaggerating, fabricating, or there could have been a risk of social desirability, that is, the participants might have answered the way they thought the researchers wanted them to answer. There is no way to check that the given time is ‘correct’. However, the primary focus of this study is not to measure exactly how much time is spent using each media form, but to provide an overview of the distribution of time between the various modes, contexts and media forms. In this article, the time given is presented as the time spent, although it is only an estimation of the time spent.

In addition to illustrating how much time the participants spend on fictional texts, this study also reveals what they deem to be fictional texts. Novels and movies, for example, are not that difficult to categorise, while music and blogs are more difficult. The participants’ own view of what fictional texts are has a strong influence on the result of this study.

**Coding and analysis**

When all the questionnaires were completed, the answers were collated into a program database that calculated the amounts of time based on which the research question and subsequent criteria were in focus. In order to facilitate a comparison of the results, the time spent was calculated in minutes per person per week.
(minutes/person/week). In cases where the answers were unreadable, unreasonable (e.g. more than 24 hours per day), incomplete, blank, impossible to measure in time (e.g. once a week), or where hours clearly had been switched with minutes and vice versa, the answers were excluded when calculating the result. Hence, the number of answers varies depending on which questionnaire question is analysed.

**Theoretical framework: Media ecology**

Because media ecology is a theoretical research field that provides tools to productively look at media habits, the results of the study will be analysed from a media ecological perspective. In 1968 the concept of media ecology was introduced by Neil Postman (1970), although the theory surrounding this concept had already been developed, among others, by Marshall McLuhan (1967). Since the 1960s, media ecology has become a field of sciences and theories containing numerous scholars who focus on media in relation to a whole range of topics such as technology, communication, culture and education (Strate 2006) to name a few that are most relevant to the present study. In the North American context in which Postman and McLuhan worked, media ecology is an interdisciplinary scientific field that studies media environments:

Media ecology looks into the matter of how media of communication affects human perception, understanding, feeling, and value, as well as how our interaction with media facilitates or impedes our chances of survival. The word ecology implies the study of environments: their structure, content, and impact on people (Postman 1970, 161).

Within this field, communication media are neither neutral nor transparent. Instead, they carry values as they transport information. Although McLuhan (1967, 16) famously claims that “the medium is the message’ because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action”, contemporary media ecology thinking uses the concept of emergence to indicate that media create or constitute an environment out of which certain effects emerge (Strate 2011). However, the relationship between the medium and the content it provides is influential since each medium is considered to have biases that influence the content that is being communicated (ibid.).

In addition to focusing on how media affect communication, media ecology theory focuses on the technological development of media and the effect this development has on the society in which it is situated. In large parts of the world, societies are characterised by a screen culture that is developing rapidly where people, particularly the younger generations, live in a media environment where communication is governed by numerous media. In addition, young people understand the present environment instinctively, and this understanding creates differences between the generations that are noticeable not only today, but also when one looks
back in time (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, n. pag.). Technology has had a great impact on media, especially audio-visual media, that are used for communication on a daily basis. There are different views on the relationship between technology and medium within the field of media ecology, and McLuhan (1967) sees the two as practically synonymous, where technologies mediate between people and the world. By not only including communication technology, but also “all human inventions and innovations”, McLuhan clearly broadens the concept of media (Strate 2006). Media ecology theory sees media as environments in which people are situated and these environments develop and change quickly.

Changes in media affect not only the nature of narrative, but also the mindset of the individual as well as the larger culture and society (Ong 2005). Ong uses “orality” and “literacy” as examples in his discussion of how media affect content. As he distinguishes between reading and writing on one hand and listening and speaking on the other, he chiefly focuses on the two media of sound (aloud or quiet) and print. In the present study, the various means through which stories are experienced are divided differently since one focus is on processes, which sides reading and listening (consumption) with speaking and writing (production). This division places the medium in the centre at the same time as it focuses on the level of creation (ibid.).

As previously stated, there is an ongoing change where the private sphere is opening up to the public sphere (Teleman 1997; Elmfeldt and Erixon 2007). This change is very noticeable when applying a theoretical framework of media ecology. The two contexts of recreation and schoolwork are overlapping with the introduction of electronic media. Whereas the print media environment, and the cultures that emerge from it, are associated with strict divisions between the private and the public sphere, the electronic media environment is associated with a blurring of the boundaries between these two spheres. The present study focuses on the amount of time the participants spend on using fictional texts and how this time is distributed between a recreational context and a school context and, in addition, which media forms they use in both these contexts.

**Results: Time spent on production and consumption with regard to context and media forms**

The initial focus is on more general results with a presentation of how much time the participants spent producing and consuming fictional texts (mode) in their recreational time and as part of their schoolwork (context) and, in addition, how the time was distributed between the modes and contexts. Second, there will be a more specific focus on how much time was spent using various media forms. Gender is a relevant aspect with regard to both the general and the specific results.
**Time spent on production and consumption as recreation and as schoolwork**

When summarising the answers of the questionnaire, the results showed that the participants consumed and produced fictional texts to a greater extent in their spare time than they did as part of their schoolwork, which can be seen in Figure 1 when comparing the two red with the two purple blocks in each column. The male participants consumed and produced 93% of their total use of fictional texts as recreation and 7% as part of their schoolwork, while the female participants, although still using fictional texts to a bigger extent (90%) in their spare time, spent slightly more of the total amount of time they devoted to fictional texts as part of their schoolwork which amounts to 10%.

The results also show differences in how much time the participants spent producing and consuming fictional texts both as recreation and as part of their schoolwork which can be seen when comparing the two darker coloured blocks with the two lighter coloured blocks in the two columns in Figure 1. Taking all the participants into account, they spent 16 times as much time consuming fictional texts than producing them. There was a difference based on gender where the male participants spent 97% of the time they spend on fictional texts on consuming and 3% on producing them. The female participants, on the other hand, spent 92% of their total time spent on fictional texts on consuming and 8% on producing them.

When looking at the total amount of time spent using fictional texts as recreation represented in Figure 2, one can see there was no big difference between the male and female participants as the males were responsible for 51% and the females for 49% of the time the participants spent on fictional texts recreationally.

![Figure 1. Use of fictional texts divided by context, mode and gender](image)
There was, however, a difference between the male and female participants when considering the total amount of time spent using fictional texts as part of their schoolwork, where the males were responsible for 40% and the females for 60% of the total time spent. This result thus shows, as can be seen in Figure 2, that the female participants spent more time overall using fictional texts than the male participants, and the reason for this is that they use more fictional texts in the school context.

**Time spent using various media forms**

Besides these general and specific results, the questionnaires also revealed how much time the participants spent on each media form with regard to both consuming and producing fictional texts as recreation and as part of their schoolwork.

When it comes to consuming fictional texts, music was the media form the participants spent most time on as shown in Figure 3 where the males spent 930.90 and the females 1186.79 minutes/person/week during their spare time listening to narratives presented musically. Other media forms both the male and female participants spent time consuming in their spare time were film and TV series, where the males spent 377.51 and the females 423.24 minutes/person/week on film and 348.41 and 455.77 minutes/person/week, respectively, on TV series. The biggest difference between the male and female participants can be found in the two media forms of computer game/console game (where the males spent considerably more time than the females, and blog/Twitter/diary where the females spent much more time than the males). The male participants spent 7 times as much time on a computer game/console game than the female participants. The difference is almost equally distributed for the media form of blog/Twitter/diary where the female participants spent 6.7 times as much time on a blog/Twitter/diary than the male participants. The amount of time spent on these two media forms is, however,
different. The females consumed an average of 195.93 minutes/person/week on a blog/Twitter/diary, while the males consumed 645.24 minutes/person/week on computer games/console games in their spare time.

The columns indicating the consumption of fictional texts as part of the schoolwork were all below 200 minutes/person/week. The media form that was consumed the most was music where the males consumed 89.02 and the females 59.74 minutes/person/week. Printed text and film were the other two media forms through which fictional texts were consumed as schoolwork, where the male participants spent 22.33 and the female participants 55.30 minutes/person/week on consuming printed fictional texts and the male participants spent 23.57 and the female participants 44.07 minutes/person/week on consuming films as part of their schoolwork. No other media form exceeded 10 minutes/person/week.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the participants spent far less time producing fictional texts than consuming them. Because they did not spend more than 100 minutes/person/week on producing fictional texts using any media form, the scale in Figure 4 is different from Figure 3.

One media form in particular – blog/Twitter/diary – was produced to a greater extent than the other media forms. The female participants spent 88.44 minutes/person/week on this media form in their spare time while the males spent 8.6 minutes/person/week on the same media form. Besides blog/Twitter/diary, the three media forms where the female participants spent most time producing fictional texts as recreation were comics/manga (19.14 minutes/person/week), printed texts (11.53 minutes/person/week) and film (8.1 minutes/person/week). The female participants spent less than 5 minutes/person/week on producing fictional texts using any other media form in their recreational time. The male participants, on the other hand, spent between 5 and 8 minutes/person/week on
producing fictional texts using several media forms recreationally such as printed texts (5.00 minutes/person/week), comics/manga (7.23 minutes/person/week), lyrics (5.57 minutes/person/week), film (6.65 minutes/person/week) and computer games (5.35 minutes/person/week). Neither the females nor the males spent more than one minute/person/week on either fan fiction or fan film.

Both the female and male participants spent most time producing fictional texts as part of the schoolwork on printed texts where the females spent 28.15 and the males spent 11.94 minutes/person/week on this media form. The female participants also spent time producing fictional texts through the two media forms comics/manga (21.10 minutes/person/week) and theatre (13.77 minutes/person/week). The male participants spent time producing fictional texts through the two media forms of film (4.09 minutes/person/week) and theatre (3.97 minutes/person/week). In addition, the female participants spent time using the media form blog/Twitter/diary (4.73 minutes/person/week) when producing fictional texts as part of their schoolwork and the male participants spent time (1.02 minutes/person/week) on producing fictional texts using the media form computer games/console games.

There is a difference in the amount of time the male and female participants spent producing fictional texts regardless of the context and media form where the females spent 203.90 minutes/person/week producing fictional texts, while the males spent 67.29 minutes/person/week. This means that the females were responsible for 75% and the males for 25% of the total amount of time the participants spent producing fictional texts.

**Discussion**

The study aimed to explore how much time young people in Sweden in upper secondary school level spend using fictional texts through various media forms in
order to find out which media forms are used the most and how the time between
mode (production/consumption), context (spare time/school), and gender (male/
female) is distributed.

The difficulties with this study involve the use of categories in the questionnaire.
One reason this is difficult is that they might guide the participants’ answers. In
particular, the category “music” is difficult to analyse since the aim of the study is to
focus on stories. Certainly, song lyrics (and music without lyrics) have a narrative
function, but it is impossible to decide how much of the story they are exposed to
while listening to music, particularly if music is used simultaneously, for example,
to writing a blog. However, the same can be said of the other categories in the
questionnaire. Combining several similar text forms, such as blog/Twitter/diary, or
printed texts where poetry is combined with novels and short stories into one
category, also poses a difficulty, especially if one wants to focus on one of the forms,
for example, blogging.

In reply to the first and third questions (how much time the participating
Swedish youth spend on consuming and producing fictional texts that take place in a
school and recreational context and whether there is a difference between the males
and females with regard to the time spent), I found that both the male and female
participants spend much more time consuming and producing fictional texts
through a range of media forms as recreation (90% for the females and 93% for
the males) than they do in school (10% for the females and 7% for the males).
There is, however, a difference between the males and females where the female
participants spend more time on narratives in school (60% for females and 40% for
the males). The result also reveals a difference between the males and females where
the females produce fictional texts to a greater extent (8%) than the males (3%).
Based on these results, it is clear that the female participants spend more time
on fictional texts in school as well as more time on fictional texts overall, and they
also spend more time producing narratives than the male participants. This result
supports previous research conducted in this subject by, among others, the Swedish
Media Council in 2010.

Two of the results are particularly relevant when connecting this study to a
pedagogical context, results that would be interesting to examine in a qualitative
follow-up study. First, the participants spend much more time on fictional texts
outside of school than in a school context. Assuming that the knowledge these par-
ticipants gain in an informal education setting matters for their performance in
school, the question arises of how this knowledge can be used in a teaching/learning
process. Second, the female participants spend more time than the male participants
on fictional texts as part of their schoolwork. What are the reasons for this result?
What are the effects of this difference? Does more experience equal better grades?

Through which media forms do the participating Swedish youth use fictional texts
as recreation and as part of their schoolwork, and is there a difference between the
males and females in which media forms they use? While taking a closer look at
the media forms through which the participants consume fictional texts, it is clear
that five media forms are predominantly used recreationally, namely: music, film,
TV series, blog/Twitter/diary and computer/console games. There is a difference
between the female and male participants where the females listen to music, watch
TV series and read blogs/tweets/diaries to a greater extent than the males, while
the males play more computer/console games than the females. In a school context,
music is the medium that is used the most by both males and females, closely
followed by printed texts and movies. It is somewhat surprising that music is the
activity that all participants spend most time on in school. The reason for this
could be that they make musical projects or that they listen to music while doing
other school assignments. Music is a difficult category to analyse. Besides music, the
media through which fictional texts are consumed in school are printed texts and
films which indicate that the newer electronic media forms have not entered the
teaching process nearly as much as they have the participants’ leisure time.

Concerning production, the participants spend much of their recreation on
writing printed texts, writing/drawing comics/manga, writing lyrics, making movies
and writing blogs/Twitter/diary. While the females spend more time on producing
printed texts, comics/manga and theatre, the biggest difference is to be found in the
blog/Twitter/diary category where they spend much more time on these activities
than the males. In school, both the males and the females spend most time writing
printed texts and the difference is that the female participants also spend time
producing comics/manga and theatre plays.

In a recreational context, both the male and female participants spend much
time using fictional texts through audio-visual media forms such as music, film and
TV series. There is a gender difference in that females spend time on blog/Twitter/
diaries and males play computer/console games. In a school context, on the other
hand, the focus is predominantly on printed texts concerning both consumption
and production. When it comes to fictional texts, the school context can thus be
connected to more traditional media forms and acts as a counterweight to the ‘new’,
multimodal media forms they use at home.

One way a media ecological perspective enhances the positive view of using
various media forms is the idea of arranging “various media to help each other so
they won’t cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another” (McLuhan
2005, 271). Taking this view into account, it is possible to place the various media
forms used by the youth into a larger perspective and watch how they function
together and see if there are benefits to gain from using a whole range of different
forms when teaching literature. As shown in other studies (e.g. Anderson, Wilson
and Fielding 1988; Lao and Krashen 2000), recreation activities have an impact on
schoolwork.
Based on the results of the study, it is clear that the two media environments the participants take part in – home and school – differ greatly much. Whereas the school environment is dominated by a print culture, the home environment is not only centred around an electronic media culture, but is also more varied in that the participants use a wider range of media forms in their recreational time. These two contexts, or media environments, can be represented from a media ecological perspective by high and low context cultures:

In high context cultures, less is communicated by the source, more is expected of the receiver in terms of prior knowledge, and it is considered inappropriate to ask questions; such cultures parallel McLuhan’s concept of cool media, Ong’s orality, and Mumford’s organic ideology [...]. In low context cultures, the source tends to spell everything out, the receiver is not expected to know or pick up what is going on, and asking questions is not out of line: such cultures parallel McLuhan’s concept of hot media, Ong’s literacy, and Mumford’s machine ideology (Strate 2006, 59).

Using high and low context cultures as representative of the media environments of home and school, it becomes clear that the two environments place different demands on a user’s abilities to independently interpret text as well as use a particular media form. The print media environment that is found in the school context demands more from the users. Although recreational activities affect schoolwork, one ought to be aware of the fact that there are different skills and abilities at work when the participants use fictional texts at home and in school due to the selection of media forms.

At the same time, it is also clear that due to technology and media these two environments overlap. Private diaries are becoming public blogs and tweets, and are used publicly in the school context. This is not a new phenomenon, although the new technology together with a general increased overlap between the public and private spheres enhance the danger of intimatisation, especially with regard to language and style, that Teleman (1997) discusses and Elmfeldt and Erixon (2007) find in their study. This overlapping of environments and the blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres affect the teaching process. This is noticeable in the disappearance of school hours, which is caused, for example, by the ability to send an email to the teacher in the evening or the teacher setting the submission deadline at midnight. A consequence of the overlapping of media environments is the teacher’s dilemma of whether to use the students’ knowledge of fictional texts gained as recreation and increase the attraction of studying fictional texts in school by including, for example, computer games in the syllabus, or to promote printed fictional texts and thus teach (or ‘force’) the students to use a media form many of them do not use to a great extent outside of the school context. Looking at electronic media’s strong influence, Postman (1979) claims that it is the school’s task to preserve the values and methods associated with a print-based context and act as a counterweight to
television and electronic media. Although Postman’s claim was made over 30 years ago, and there have been several technological developments since then, it is worth considering both the negative and positive effects electronic media have on the teaching process, as well as the possibility of using the students’ knowledge in this process, and at the same time providing them with the values that stem from a print culture. This places high demands on both teachers and students.

The most sensational result of this study concerns the amount of time the participants, predominantly the females, spend on life-writings in the blogs/Twitter/diary genre. This result, as with all the others, is dependent on the participants’ views on what constitutes a fictional text containing a story. If some of the participants see blogs/Twitter/diary as non-fictional texts, the amount of time for this category would be even higher than now since the numbers are calculated per person. The amount of time given in the questionnaires shows that those participants who write a blog/Twitter/diary spend a lot of time on these media forms. If one calculates how much time the females who claim to either consume or produce a blog/Twitter/diary in school or as recreation spend on these media forms, one can see that they spend 8.43 hours/person/week on blog/Twitter/diary and the participant who uses these forms the most spends up to 50 hours/week on these activities. The female participants spend a significant amount of time on live-writings and thus produce fictional texts to a greater extent than the male participants. As a result, they have more practice in writing texts in general which might influence their performance in any text-related assignment in school.

There is a general difference in men’s and women’s autobiographies where autobiographies of and about men have historically focused on portraying the image of ‘the great man’ while, in the case of women, they have traditionally been regarded as more or less private diaries (Smith and Watson 2003, 5). This difference in status is reflected in the criticism following the genre (Smith and Watson 1998, 4). Today, however, the genre of autobiographies, or life-writing, has gained status both within and outside of academia and, in a way, the self-writing females, the participants who spend much time on the blog/Twitter/diary category, can be seen to be answering Smith and Watson’s (2003, 5) request for “women’s self-representation across diverse media at the visual/textual interface”.

There are many kinds of blogs and Twitter accounts online, some more formal and professionally organised than others, but the personal diary-like blogs that are written in the life-writing genre are frequently informal in style. In a case study of students’ use of blogs in school assignments, West (2008, 596) states that her participants “seem aware of the expectations of this digital form, which includes an informal style; frequent use of abbreviations and acronyms; and a relaxed stance with respect to standard English grammar, usage, and mechanics”. The informal style of blogs thus appears to be well spread and commonly agreed upon. Blogs are not necessarily informal, but an informal language and style is accepted in the genre.
While producing fictional texts as recreation seems to positively influence writing skills in a school context, the informal style and language the participants use differ from the style and language required in school. Hence, it would be productive to study possible effects of the students’ life-writing activities in combination with their academic results. In addition, it would be productive to analyse their performances in various genres since there might be, in a very general and broad sense, some genres that are used in school that suit female students better than male students or vice versa due to their leisure time interests.

Blog/Twitter/diary writing is an activity that 10% of the young females who answered the questionnaire also do at school. While the instructions were clear about separating schoolwork from recreation even if they take place in school and vice versa, it is possible that this answer still reflects a recreational activity that takes place in school since only 3.5% of the young males who answered the questionnaire claim to do this activity in school. However, blogging can be used as a way to write argumentative stories/entries and practise that style of writing as a school activity, so it is possible that blogging is a means to produce texts in school. Also, writing diaries can be used as a school assignment and/or exercise in creative writing.

Looking at how media and particularly new technology create contemporary society, how people communicate within it, and how they experience fictional texts, a media ecological perspective highlights the large amount of time spent on life-writings such as the blogs/Twitter/diary category. The contemporary forms of diaries, blogs, and Twitter follow a general trend that calls for immediacy and collaboration usually through comments which are frequently used in news articles and social media such as Facebook status updates. The way blog/Twitter/diary writers combine fact and fiction also correlates with the increasing spread of reality shows on TV. Life-writings carry social and cultural values and may be considered a powerful media form through which many young people, especially young women, express themselves as they consume and produce fictional texts.

As shown in the results of the study, the participants, particularly the males, are not reading printed texts (novels, short stories, poetry) nearly as much as they listen to music, watch films and TV series, play computer/console games and read blogs/Twitter/diaries. The decrease in reading habits revealed in the report *The Culture of Reading* (2012) is also noticeable in this study. However, this study also shows that the participants’ media habits are not decreasing, and that they spend much time using fictional texts in other text or media forms as their recreation. Perhaps they have an increased communicative competence that is not measurable in terms of ‘reading’. It might then be necessary to question what the act of ‘reading’ actually entails.

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Notes

1 These universes focus on the whole context that surrounds a story and the various forms in which the story occurs; for example, the Twilight series that contains printed novels, movies, various fan fiction etc.

2 The steering document from 1994, Lpf 94, was prevailing at the time the study was being carried out.
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