

**Author:** Livingstone, Sonia.

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*Sonia Livingstone*

## **Implications for Children and Television of the Changing Media Environment: A British and European Perspective**

This paper contains a brief summary of my recent research project in the area of children and television. In outlining the research, I draw out, again in brief, some of the key findings from that project, using these as an opportunity to identify issues and prospects for future research in the field.

### **I PROJECT BACKGROUND**

We can no longer imagine leisure or the home without media and communication technologies. As the media environment changes around us, questions arise about the meaning, availability and use of media in daily life. In 1995, the LSE team was invited by a consortium of funders to conduct a wide-ranging empirical project exploring the place of new forms of media in the lives of young people aged 6-17.

The purpose was to update the work of Himmelweit et al (*Television and the Child*, 1958), a study of the introduction of television into British families. Then it was national broadcast television which was new. While the present project also focused on the domestic electronic screen, this being central to developments in domestic audiovisual, information and telecommunications services, now under • new media• , we included *cable/satellite television, the personal computer (PC), the CDROM, TV-linked games machines, the Internet and Email.*

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The final report was launched in March 1999. Simultaneously, parallel projects were conducted in each of 11 other European countries: many of these have reported their findings already, and the comparative findings are currently being analysed. The research aims were as follows.

- To chart current *access and use* for new media at home (and, in less detail, at school).
- To provide a *comprehensive* account of domestic leisure and media activities.
- To *understand the meaning* of the changing media environment for children and parents.
- To map access to and uses of media in relation to *social inequalities* and *social exclusion*.
- To provide a *baseline* for media use against which to measure future changes.

To achieve its research aims, the project was designed in accordance with three guiding principles.

- *The importance of context*: access, use and meanings of new media were analysed in relation to older domestic media, to other leisure activities, to family life and peer culture, and to IT at school.
- *The importance of children's experiences*: we have consistently tried to listen to the voices of children and young people as well as to their parents and teachers.
- *Multiple methods*: the design combined qualitative interviews with over 200 children and young people from all over the UK with a detailed national survey of 1303 6-17 year olds, together with nearly 1000 of their parents, across the United Kingdom.

Parallel projects were conducted by research teams in 11 European countries (Denmark, Germany, Finland, Flanders, France, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland), coordinated by the British team.

## **II PROJECT FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

### **Television viewing in context**

Children and young people combine a range of media in their everyday lives according to a variety of lifestyle factors which frame media meanings, access and use. Within this broad and diversified picture of the contemporary media environment, *newer media* - from multiple television channels to the personal computer and the Internet - are finding their

place. While the very diversity of media provision and use makes generalisations about ,children' or ,the media' hazardous, certain issues stand out.

Centrally, the use of any one medium should be understood in relation to the use of other media, given the diversifying array of media, as well as in relation to the broader contexts of family, home, school and community.

### ***Diversifying media opportunities***

Children in the UK spend some five hours a day with media. Around half of this is spent with television, and next most important is music. Despite the fact that in British homes now nearly all children have access to an ,alternative screen' (i.e. TV-linked games machine, a personal computer, Gameboy, etc., in addition to television/video), these newer screen-based options are on average making relatively small inroads into overall time spent with media.

At present the new media occupy only a rather small proportion of children's time and attention: contextualising new media use in relation to other media and leisure activities may serve to *diffuse public anxieties* about addicted or isolated children. For a significant minority of children, however, computer-based media are beginning to compete in terms of time and interest with television, and for a very tiny minority, these together may occupy up to 7 hours per day.

- Almost all 6-17 year olds (99%) watch *television* in their leisure time, and on average spend two and half hours almost every day in front of the screen. Over four in every five watch *videos* (81%). On average, they spend just under two hours on two or three days a week doing so. Two-thirds play *computer games* (64%), on average for just under an hour and a half on just over 3 days a week. A quarter of players will play daily. Almost nine in ten (86%) listen to *music*, spending on average an hour and a half on five days a week (often while doing something else).

### ***Is television viewing in decline?***

As the media options multiply, will children and young people watch ever less television in the future, especially less national television? Our findings tend to suggest the opposite.

- While new media figure large on the public and policy agenda, television is retaining its importance in young people's lives. When children are asked what medium they *would miss most*, television is named by more than three times as many as its nearest rival, the hi-fi. Further, it is striking that no matter what children's style of media use, by far the largest proportion of time is spent watching television. Thus even children who use most media at significantly below average levels, still watch on average for around two hours per day (compared with the 39

minutes on average that those we identified as 'book lovers' spend reading). Similarly, those who play computer games also spend considerable amounts of time watching television.

Incidentally, while the overall amount of television children watch has increased substantially since the early days of its introduction, the conditions of its use have changed less dramatically.

- Then as now, children watched a diversity of television programmes but generally preferred those made for a general or adult audience; their viewing habits - especially their amount of viewing - matched that of their parents; even then they spent relatively little time reading books; and then too they were hardly 'glued' to the set but rather were out with their friends whenever possible.

### ***British children watch more television***

The comparative project suggests that British children particularly watch more television than children in other European countries. They watch up to half an hour more per day than in the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain, and as much as an hour per day more than in Germany, France and Switzerland.

Why do British children watch more? Many factors serve to differentiate these countries, including possibly the nature and quality of British terrestrial television and the fact that global channels are in their national language, English (although in fact we find that just over half (55%) of favourite programmes are British, a proportion which increases as children get older, largely due to the popularity of British sport and national soaps).

A multichannel environment may also increase viewing for British children (although as many other European countries have had more channels for longer, explaining the British figures remains difficult). Thus while overall we found few instances of time being displaced from one medium to another, we could identify discernable *increases* in time spent watching television for those with access to multiple non-terrestrial channels (via cable or satellite technologies).

- Nearly half of the homes with children in our sample have cable or satellite television (42%). These offer channels dedicated to children and young people's favourite television genres - cartoons for the youngest, sport for the older boys and drama series and serials for older girls. Children with access to cable or satellite watch at least a quarter of an hour *longer* each day. This increases to up to an hour extra each day for younger girls and boys in their early teens. (This seems not to be because of the wide choice of channels *per se* but because of interest in a few specific channels, suggesting they are currently ill-served by terrestrial television.)

### ***A more specialised media mix***

New media are adding to the media mix, but appear to be displacing non-media activities, rather than other media. Indeed, far from displacement occurring, we find that the more time children spend with one medium, the more they tend to spend with others. This is particularly true

for the various 'screen-entertainment' media (television, video, computer/video games); the only, significant, exception is that those who spend longer reading books watch less television, and vice versa.

Instead of displacement, new media may be stimulating older forms of media to become more specialised, now they have to compete in a diversifying media environment. How this occurs depends on how readily new media may be *incorporated into young people's pre-existing practices and priorities*, namely those of social interaction, communication, narrative and play: hence the importance of contexts of media use. The implications for television, itself a medium which is becoming increasingly specialised, are yet to emerge.

### ***Intertextual media uses***

The opposite trend to that of specialisation is also evident in the ways that children combine different media in constructing their leisure lifestyles, for *intertextuality* (or transtextuality) appears to be growing. By this, we mean that (unlike researchers) children may be decreasingly concerned with the fortunes or characteristics of particular media and rather are following, and will increasingly follow, their specific interests or favourite themes *across* whichever media represents them. In other words, while the technologies are only beginning to converge, the contents are already converging, and children's practices of use emphasise and strengthen these convergences.

- If we examine such intertextual practices by content theme, we see that certain themes dominate. For example, similar content preferences drive the choice of both computer games and television programmes. For example, girls and boys exhibit the same content preferences across both television and computer games, as follows. For television, boys rank sport highest (27%), cartoons next (20%) and soaps third (11%), while girls reverse this ranking (soaps - 41%, cartoons - 10%, sport - 2%); similarly, for computer games, boys rank sport highest (35%), fighting games next (23%) and adventure/ quests third (19%), while girls again reverse this ranking (adventure/ quests - 35%, fighting - 23%, sport - 12%).
- If we examine such intertextual practices by population subgroup, we see that while some children mix and match their favourite themes within and across

different media, others are remarkably consistent. Those we have termed 'screen entertainment fans', those who spend considerably more than average amounts of time watching television and videos and playing computer games and very little time with books, turn out also to be sports fans. This means that they - predominantly working-class boys between the ages of 12-14 - say that their favourite computer game is most likely to be a sports game, their favourite TV programme is most likely to be a sports programme, that of a list of 14 interests, they most often choose sport, and that they are most likely to say that being good at sport is what 'makes you popular with people your own age'.

In other words, while researchers may define their concerns by medium (hence the present focus on television), this division cuts across the crossmedia connections which children weave in constructing their everyday lives and individualised lifestyles.

### ***Non-media contexts***

Looking beyond television-specific factors in explaining why children spend so much time with screen-based media, we identify two key factors which do not concern the media *per se*.

Specifically, children and young people tell us of a lack of things to do in the area where they live while their parents express their fears for children's safety outside the home. The result appears to be the provision of an increasingly personalised media environment inside the home and, particularly, inside the child's bedroom.

- Insufficient outdoor activities: a substantial majority (66%) of children and young people aged 9-17 think there is not enough for them to do in the area where they live. This level of dissatisfaction is around double that expressed by young people in other *European countries*. For example in the UK 81% of young people aged 15-16 are dissatisfied with what is available for them in the area where they live, compared with only 61% in Sweden, 49% in the Netherlands, 43% in France, 34% in Germany, 21% in Switzerland, and as few as 1% in Spain.
- Parental fears: parents are deeply concerned about their children's safety outside the home. Only 11% of parents say the streets where they live are 'very safe' for their child, compared with 56% thinking this about the neighbourhood where they were brought up. Unsurprisingly therefore, 31% of parents say their child spends 'very little' or 'none' of their time outside the home or garden without adults around (only 12% say this was the case for themselves at their child's age).

Yet while media are inextricably part of children and young people's lives, children generally prefer to be outdoors in the company of friends rather than to gaze at a screen, unless they are tired or want to fill a gap between activities.

- When asked for their top 3 choices for 'a really good day', 41% chose the cinema, 39% chose seeing friends and 35% would play sport; only 14% chose television.

- When asked for the 3 things they are most likely to end up doing on a really *boring day*, 41% say television, 28% would read a book and 22% would watch a video.

Thus even the most popular domestic media activity - watching television - is a second-best option, and is widely seen as what you do when you are bored and have nothing better to do. In this context, it is important to note television's unique character: its dominance rests heavily on the breadth of gratifications it offers ( - interestingly, there is considerable diversity in children's favourite programmes: even the most popular is named by only 18%). By contrast, most media are commonly associated in children's views with only one, or at most two, of the five uses and gratifications we asked about.

## **Individualised television use**

### ***Media-rich bedrooms***

Possibly by way of compensation for the perceived absence of outdoor activities and freedoms, increasing numbers of young people are provided with a rich media environment at home. Moreover, given the complex dynamics of everyday family life, acquiring new and multiple media goods often appears to offer the solution to the competing claims on domestic time and space which characterise everyday life today.

- Around two-thirds of children and young people aged 6-17 have their own personal stereo (68%), television set (63%) and hifi (61%). A third (34%) have their own TV-linked games machine and two-thirds (67%) have access to one somewhere in the home. Almost every household with children (96%) has a VCR and 21% of children have their own.
- By comparison with other European countries, Britain leads in personal provision of screen entertainment media. The picture is particularly striking for the numbers of 6-7 year olds with a TV set in their bedroom. In the UK, 50% have their own set. This may be compared with 25% in Sweden, 21% in Spain, 17% in Germany, 16% in Switzerland and France, and only 12% in the Netherlands.

In consequence of the above, we can contextualise media use as shaped in part by the changing boundary between *public and private spaces or spheres*. First, the cultural meanings and practices concerned with boundary of *,the front door'* is critical in determining how and where children spend their leisure time. Second, and linked, the boundary of *,the bedroom door'* also has implications for media use, as it marks the division of communal/family and individual or private space *within* the home, made possible in part by the multiplication of relatively affordable media goods.

Looking more broadly across the history of twentieth century domestic media, it appears that, following in the path of radio and music media, the social uses of television have shifted in recent decades from foreground to background, from the centre of family life to a balance (struck differently in different families) between communal and individualised uses, and from the mainstay of the family evening to a casual, round-the-clock experience. This has implications for, or perhaps better, these shifts reflect, social processes of individualisation of lifestyles and the changing boundary between public and private.

### ***Social contexts of use***

While spending time alone is often valuable and, indeed, valued by children and young people, children remain strongly motivated to seek out others, preferably friends and preferably out of the home. But as young people encounter many restrictions on their freedom, they often stay at home and spend time with media instead. Is the proliferation of media goods within the home contributing to a more general tendency within the family to ever more individualised and often solitary use of media?

While only ten years ago, media researchers were writing of the 'living room wars' occasioned by having to negotiate access to the main set in the living room, across differences of gender and generation. Today the multiplicity of television sets and other media in the home make co-viewing more a matter of deliberate choice, whether on the part of the child or the parent. If such choices are not made, family members may increasingly view separately, with possibly adverse consequences for shared knowledge and values.

At present, the evidence suggests that families are indeed making this choice. Thus while most media are seen by family members as part of their individual 'media style', television - even in multiset homes - is most often the medium which brings family members together.

- Television is the medium most often shared with family: as their children grow older, parents share fewer and fewer activities with them. But watching television together stays at the top of the list, and two-thirds of children watch their favourite programme with someone else, nearly always family.
- On the other hand, when we asked children and young people how they *prefer* to watch television (or play computer games), the most common answer was 'alone'. By this, they mean viewing without parents and siblings.

- Hence the pressure towards acquiring multiple sets - the maximum we found was a household with three children and ten television sets!
- Far more than is currently possible, children would like to share television and playing computer games with their friends. When asked what they talk about with friends, television was far and away the most popular topic of conversation.
- Similarly, children swap media goods among themselves - especially new media goods (CD's, videos, computer games), visit the home of those with a new computer game or video or television channel, etc. Thus even if media cannot be used together with friends, they still play a vital *social* role in peer culture.

### ***Individual contexts of use***

On the other hand, we can clearly identify the rise of a media-rich bedroom culture in Britain and elsewhere. Traditional images of media use, especially television, centre on the family living room. But today's media are more personalised, increasingly dispersed throughout the home. From around 9 years old, children's bedrooms become important to them as a private space for socialising, identity display and just being alone. As noted above, equipping the bedroom with media goods represents an ideal compromise, as parents see it, in which children are both entertained and kept safe

- It should be noted, however, that not all share equally in the well-equipped bedroom. Older children and teenagers possess more media, with the exception of books, and similarly more boys than girls own most media. Working-class children (or children with less educated parents) are far more likely to have their own screen-entertainment media (television, video, games machine) but fewer books.
- Importantly, while income strongly influences the acquisition of media elsewhere in the house, it is rarely a predictor of children's personal ownership of media. Rather, parental education is what makes the difference in the bedroom: more highly educated parents are less likely to put a television or video recorder in their children's bedrooms, but more likely to provide them with books. Moreover, we encountered a proportion of relatively low income households where the child's bedroom was equipped apparently at the expense of the rest of the home.

Most children have, or want, their own television (and video). Hence, as most children have music media, and some kind of print in their bedroom, and as most homes are well-equipped for media, a lower level of provision in the bedroom (no television, no games machine) is not generally a matter of income but may represent a disinclination to prioritise screen media on the part of parents, and/or it may reflect a positive preference on the part of parents for shared rather than personalised media use within the family. Whatever the reasons for having a television in the bedroom, this represents a particular context within which television is viewed, and in the European context, this is new.

- Media in the bedroom are heavily used. Those with particular media in their own room (e.g. television, music, computer) spend more time with those media compared with those who must share with others.
- Interviews with children and young people showed over and over again how personally owned media are used as an audiovisual backdrop, as source of images for identity development, as sign of conspicuous consumption and as a focus for shared, social activity.

## **Domestic regulation of television use**

### ***Unsupervised viewing***

This new context for media use, and the multiplication of media goods in the home more generally, raises new regulatory issues for children's viewing. Children's and parents' accounts often differ in relation to bedroom viewing, making it difficult to obtain a clear picture. But there may be grounds for concern regarding viewing after 9 pm without parental mediation (whether this means restrictions on viewing, or constructive discussion of what is seen).

- 1 in 3 children with their own set say they watch television in their bedroom after the 9 pm 'watershed' (the UK system whereby 'adult' material is restricted to later in the evening). This includes as many as 28% of the 6-8 year olds, irrespective of gender and class.
- More generally, nearly 1 in 3 with their own TV say they usually watch in their bedroom after school and in the evening. Further, those with their own TV are twice as likely to watch their favourite programme alone.

### ***Parental anxieties***

Are parents concerned? In broad terms, it seems that parents do not worry overmuch about their children's media use, though many express more general qualms regarding the quality of the childhood they are offering their children compared to that which they themselves experienced.

- Media use ranks low among parental concerns for their child: drugs are named by 51%, the child's job prospects by 47%, the child being a victim of crime by 39%. By comparison, 24% are concerned about sex, violence and bad language on television and only 6% about addictive computer games or violence, sex and bad language on videos.
- Media use causes arguments in only a minority of households: TV in 34%, the telephone in 30%, computer games in 15%, videos in 14% and music in 8%.

- As a cause of family arguments, the media thus rank behind helping in the house (59%), homework (49%) and going to bed (48%) (though in practice television viewing may be implicated in each of these).

Nonetheless, parents use various kinds of regulation of their children's media use, though none is as frequent as their regulation of the child going out of the house. Television and telephone are top of the list as the most restricted media, followed by computer games.

- Positive strategies include chatting to their children about a variety of media. Around three-quarters of parents say they discuss with their children what they see on television and over half sometimes watch with their child to aid their comprehension.
- Restrictive strategies for limiting or controlling viewing are used by more than half of parents, especially those with young children or those with more concerns.
- Children and parents do not necessarily agree on media regulation. Fathers and mothers both say they regulate their child's media use. But their children report considerably less regulation, especially from fathers.
- Our pilot research suggested that while 3 in 4 parents think their child mostly follows their rules for viewing and only 12% say they have no rules, as many as 42% of children say their family has no rules for watching television.

Overall, British parents are generally satisfied with the media, especially the television programmes, available for their children. They worry rather little about their child watching television or playing computer games unsupervised in their bedroom, and they consider their child (though often not other people's children) to be a sensible and discriminating media user.

Further, children and parents are often in tune with each others' media interests, to some extent obviating the apparent need for rules to regulate media use. As often noted, we find that parents who watch a lot of television tend to have children who do the same. This suggests that here, as in other situations, parental example may be more powerful than parental rules.

### ***Confidence in the regulators***

If nationally, the media environment is increasingly difficult to regulate, resulting in ever more expectations being placed on parents' shoulders, so too domestically it is less easy to supervise than before. The argument that public regulation should not intrude into the privacy of the home found little support amongst parents.

- On the contrary, parents rely on the good judgement of broadcasters and media regulators and strongly express the wish to be able to continue to do so.
- Moreover, parents are generally of the view that once their children have reached their early teens, it is all but impractical for them to attempt restrictions on their media use at home.

Being able to rely on regulation is especially important to parents in relation to *television* because most children over eight years old prefer family/adult programmes to those specifically targeted at children.

- Specifically, only a minority (24%) name a children's programme as their favourite: even at age 6-8 only just over half (58%) do so. In interviews, children commonly expressed themselves as wishing to be older than they are, and their media tastes reflect this desire.

(Relying on regulation is also increasingly important to parents in relation to *computerbased media* because many have little understanding of the computer games or Internet sites popular with their children.)

As television sets spread into the bedroom, liberal regulatory options such as parental mediation through conversation during co-viewing become less practicable. We observed little enthusiasm among parents for taking on themselves a more restrictive approach to their children's media use. However, the knowledge that children are watching television later into the evening, in a place relatively difficult to supervise, may lie behind parents' endorsement of the broadcasting watershed.

- 82% of parents think the 'watershed' is 'a very good idea'. One third agree with the present time of 9 pm, while a quarter favour 10 pm.

As a strategy, parents find trying to regulate children's media use by the clock impractical for all but the youngest children. Deciding where to put media within the home offers a more manageable strategy, but depends on many factors other than that of controlling children's media use.

## **New media, new inequalities?**

### ***Ambiguities in the meanings of new media***

The question of new social inequalities, - new social divisions between the 'info-rich' and 'infopoor' is of widespread concern. Our European comparisons suggest that the UK 'leads' for screen-entertainment culture but lags behind for IT. For by comparison with key European countries, children and young people in the UK have more access to, and make

more use of television and computer games, but they have less access to the PC, multimedia computers and the Internet.

Our British study suggests, however, that for young people and their families, this is a moment in which definitions of new media technologies are fluid. It is therefore a key moment for addressing social inequalities. At present, the *cultural meanings* of the PC, CD-ROM and Internet are not fixed: young people are uncertain whether to associate the PC with print or with screen entertainment, or whether to associate the Internet with an encyclopedia or with communication and fun.

Insofar as television as a medium is also changing with the advent of digital television, convergence with the Internet, etc. - we might productively think how to harness these changes so as to minimise social inequalities. It would be easy to draw the conclusion, for example, that in Britain, the key beneficiaries of the PC and the Internet at home are and will continue to be middle class, while working class children continue to be the focus of public anxieties as they spend 'excessive' amounts of time with television, videos and computer games.

### ***Inequalities in gender and social class***

It is important to note that such inequalities largely rest on discrepancies in household income and hence, differences in new media access. For in terms of content preferences or time use, the differences between working and middle class children are far less: while working-class children to spend longer with television and computer games, those working-class children with a PC at home use it just as much as do middle-class PC users. Moreover, we found no significant differences between middle-class and workingclass children in their preferred types of television programme, their favourite kinds of computer game or their named interests.

Addressing inequalities is complicated by our conclusion that, across the range of media, inequalities in *gender* predominantly arise from differences in content and content preferences, while inequalities in *social class* predominantly arise from differences in media access at home.

Our qualitative work especially suggests that both these inequalities, neither of which themselves are new, are now shaping young people's understanding and use of the new

media environment. Different policies will be needed for gender and social class inequalities.

### ***The changing nature of watching television***

In thinking about further research on television and children, it must be recognised that the traditional oppositions (and anxieties about children and media) - of being alone or with others, of engaging in media or non-related activities, of passive and active leisure - are no longer useful. These oppositions worked for the earlier days of television, when this meant mass market television, broadcast nationally to the single set in the family living room, but today we cannot draw such neat dividing lines between different aspects of children's daily lives. Children may be intensely social even when alone, they often put the media in the centre of their face-to-face engagement with others, and they may be very active with media whose response options are relatively limited (e.g. computer games) while rather passive in relation to new interactive media (e.g. Internet).

Moreover, despite the much-hyped potential of new forms of interactive media, these are either barely available as yet or the interactivity offered is very limited: while the mental activity required of the reader of books or the viewer of a television programme can be considerable, many so-called 'interactive' media offer limited response opportunities to the user. I have said little about interactivity in this paper, but as a future trend in television, as well as for the Internet and the expanding market in computer games which link to both television and the Internet, understanding this changing relation between audience and medium surely represents the key challenge for the immediate future.

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