

Does New Media Really Impact Children?

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Abstract- *In an age of ever expanding media use by children, there is a growing concern among parents, academics and policy makers about what impact these technologies are having on our children and youth. In the recent past several organizations around the world have initiated studies to understand young children and their ownership and use of media. However there is hardly any such study undertaken in India. This paper will try to explore questions relating to media's impact on children and youth and try to put these questions in perspective. In the absence of much Indian data, it will draw from studies done outside of India and try to locate the questions in our context. It will also try to question the categories such as 'generation' being used as sociological categories and try to determine whether there is actually any reason to be worried. It will also explore the question of whether there is an uniform impact across societies and whether children are only passive consumers rather than active participants in the process.*

Keywords: Children, New Media, Technology, Digital Age.

Introduction

In a recent report from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and Stanford University on media multitasking, Claudia Wallis concluded¹, “New technology sometimes brings change that is so swift and sweeping, that the implications are hard to grasp.” Such is certainly the case with the rapid expansion of media use by children and youth for ever-larger portions of their waking hours. Academics, policymakers, and practitioners show a keen interest in the digital age. And, of course, parents are scrambling to keep up with the preponderance of new gadgets that influences modern household arrangements and communication patterns.

This report takes a fresh look at data emerging from studies undertaken by Sesame Workshop, independent scholars, foundations, and market researchers on the media habits of young children, who are often overlooked in the public discourse that focuses on teens and tweens. It reviewed seven recent studies — several never before released — about young children and their ownership and use of media. By focusing on very young children and analyzing multiple studies over time, we were able to arrive at a new, balanced portrait of children's media habits. They also introduce portraits of children's digital media use from a smaller qualitative study

conducted by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center to add some tint and texture to the quantitative findings.

Not everything they have reported here is newsworthy. But taken in its entirety, the view is of a settled pattern: Even as technology evolves and young children increasingly turn to games and mobile media, they still love television best. Here is a snapshot of the findings of the study:

- Children have more access to all kinds of digital media, and are spending more time during the day with them than ever before.
- Television continues to exert a strong hold over young children, who spend more time with this medium than any other.
- Not all children have access to newer digital technologies, nor do all children use media in the same ways once they do own them. Family income continues to be a barrier to some children owning technology, even as the price of devices falls.
- Lower-income, Hispanic, and African American children consume far more media than their middle-class and white counterparts.

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- Children appear to shift their digital media habits around age 8, when they increasingly open their eyes to the wide world of media beyond television.
- Mobile media appears to be the next “it” technology, from handheld video games to portable music players to cell phones. Kids like to use their media on the go.

What seems to emerge from this and many other studies is that we are confronted with a generation which is so attuned to technology that all of us, parents teachers and society at large really do not know how to deal with the situation.

Young people are often called the digital generation – a generation defined by and through its experience of digital computer technology. This rhetoric can be found in popular commentary in fields as diverse as commerce, education, government and youth activism. Thus, the electronics company 'Panasonic' advertises its e-wear MP3 players as providing “digital music for a digital generation”; the US department of commerce speaks about “preparing the digital generation for the age of innovation”; the educationist Papert writes of the “digital generation gap” between parents and children and the journalist Lassica seeks to defend young people from what he sees as “Hollywood's war against the digital generation. Elsewhere we encounter “the Nintendo generation”, “the Playstation generation”, and the “net generation” as well as related constructions such as “cyberkids”, “bionic children” and even “cyborg babies”. Meanwhile in Japan, there has been considerable discussion about the “thumb generation” – young people who have apparently developed a new dexterity in their thumbs as a result of their constant use of gaming consoles and mobile phones. In other words, what we seem to be discussing as academics is that there is a generation, which has grown up with the computer and new media technologies that are somehow different simply because of it.

Closer home, there is an advertisement that is running on TV where a mobile internet company

is playing on the idea of this generation and is showing how a child is born and is immediately hooked on to the internet that it can look at the net and cut it's own umbilical chord. The mother and the doctors stand horrified as the child grows up in seconds and walks out of the birthing room swinging to music from a smart phone. I think, this is a horrifying ad and am surprised that no one objects to this at a time when people seem to be super sensitive to anything that hurts sensibilities. Is this because we have become so insensitive to media messages that we no longer even see the message? Or is it that we have, as a society, accepted the notion of a cyber-generation and believe that this is the future that awaits us?

Nevertheless, just as the debates on gender, the study of generational differences inevitably runs the risk of essentialising those differences. Which experiences, dispositions and characteristics do we take to be representative of a generation? Who are the spokespersons of that generation and how is this authority established? How do we actually identify the boundaries and even the shared consciousness of a generation?

These kinds of questions are often at the heart of academic controversies about the nature of social change. For example, there has been considerable debate within sociology between Ronald Inglehardt and others about the notion of a post-materialist generation². Essentially Inglehardt argues that there has been a generational shift from materialist to post-materialist values in the post war period; yet his analysis raises difficult theoretical and methodological questions about how we measure and identify values, and about the relationship between the values that people might proclaim or sign up to in a questionnaire and their actual behavior. Both within the academy and popular debate, therefore, the concept of generation is complex and contested, and how we define, characterize and study generation is highly problematic.

Social scientists have suggested that in recent decades, chronological has been decoupled from people's actual life situations and that the normative biography – or the steady progress of

the life course – has become decentred. Even so, children and young people are not passive victims of this process. They are actively involved in sustaining the distinctions and boundaries between the generations even as they may aspire to challenge them. In exploring the changing meanings of such age based, generational categories, therefore, we need to understand how they are actually used by young people as well as how they work to regulate and define the meanings of age differences. We need to recall that such categories are not merely discursive, imaginary fictions: They also have real material consequences.

A technologically determinist position would mean that there are many issues and phenomena that many of the technology augmenters are bound to ignore. They often neglect the fundamental continuities and interdependencies between new media and the old media such as TV. These continuities exist at the level of form and content, as well as in terms of economics. A historical view will show that old and new technologies very often come to co-exist and one is never replaced by the other. Particularly in the area of media, the advent of new technologies may often change the functions and uses of new technologies, but it almost never completely displaces them. This kind of reading would also tend to ignore what many theorists have called the banality of much new media use. It is in fact quite interesting to see several recent studies which have suggested that most children's everyday uses of the internet is characterized not by spectacular forms of innovation and creativity but by relatively mundane forms of information retrieval. In other words, what most children are doing on the internet is not a subject of great worry for the parents and elders as made out to be, but in fact much more simple and harmless activities such as visiting fan web sites, downloading music and movies, emailing or chatting with friends and shopping (or at least window shopping). Technology offers them different ways of communicating with each other pursuing specialist hobbies and interests as compared with offline methods, but the differences can easily be overstated. For today's child, the idea of “friend”, or “community” is

quite different from what they mean to us elders. For them friends are not people who you meet face-to-face on the streets or in school or the café but a much larger constituency who you communicate with without fear of reprimand. The geography of the child's mindscape has changed drastically and we have not seen or read that map.

While one sees the mundane side of the internet one cannot ignore the downside of internet – the undemocratic tendencies of many online communities, the limited nature of much of what is called digital learning and the grinding tedium of much technologically driven work. One of the most troubling issues here is the continuing digital divide – the gap between the technology rich and the technology poor, both within and between societies. Many theoreticians of technology believed and still believe that this is a temporary phenomenon, and that the technology poor will eventually catch up, although this is obviously to assume that the early adopters will stay where they are. That the flow of technology will come to a halt for a while which will allow the technology poor to catch up and then they can all merrily be on their way to salvation. It is also to assume that the market is a neutral mechanism that functions simply by giving individuals what they need. The possibility that technology maybe used to exploit young people economically or indeed that the market may not provide equally for all, does not enter the argument at all. From the Indian perspective, this argument is so complacent that these theoreticians do not even see that there is a view that children growing up without the access to such technology, for example, in many developing countries, are likely to be developmentally disadvantaged. This is more damaging than any other argument from my perspective. It is one thing to hold such views. One may dismiss them as borne out of a certain degree of ignorance. However to not possess the ability to or simply choose not to see this is just dangerous and arrogant.

The technologically empowered cyberkids of the popular imagination may indeed exist. But even if they do, they are in a minority, and they are

untypical of young people in general. One could even argue that, for most young people, technology is a relatively marginal concern. Very few are interested in technology in its own right, and most are simply concerned about what they can use it for. But like other forms of marketing rhetoric, the discourse of the digital generation is precisely an attempt to construct the object of which it purports to speak. It represents not a description of what children or young people are, but a set of imperatives about what they should be or what they need to become.

Consuming media, it seems, has far outstripped reading storybooks or playing dress-up as the average American child's favorite pastime. Overall, children between the ages of two and 18 spend an average of almost five-and-a-half hours a day at home watching television, playing video games, surfing the Web or using some other form of media, revealed a 1999 Kaiser Family Foundation report called "Kids & Media @ The New Millennium³. Often children multitask, engaging in more than one media-related activity at the same time. How does all this media use affect children's cognitive, emotional and social development? Researchers are only beginning to search for answers, now that society is taking the question seriously.

"For years, psychologists interested in answering that question had their funding proposals turned down at the National Science Foundation [NSF] and the National Institutes of Health," says Jeff McIntyre, senior legislative and federal affairs officer in APA's Public Policy Office. "Funders would say, 'We're not going to pay for someone to study kids' video games. That's silly.'" Thanks to pressure from APA and researchers themselves, such attitudes are now changing. The NSF recently gave a group of psychologists a \$2.45 million, five-year grant to study how interactive media affect children's learning. Other psychologists are tackling the question of how more traditional media such as television affect children. Although there are still many more questions than answers, one thing is becoming clearer as psychologists continue their research: No electronic medium's effects are all good or all bad; it's the content that makes all the difference.

Digital children

Among the research groups working to fill gaps in the knowledge base is the NSF-funded Children's Digital Media Center project. Based at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., the center also has locations at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California, Los Angeles, and Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. "We have a whole new media world,"⁴ says the project's principal investigator, Sandra L. Calvert, PhD, a Georgetown University psychology professor. "We're at the beginning stages of sorting out what its impact on children will be." Building on what is known about older media, the center's research focuses on two major questions: How does the interactivity that is a hallmark of the new technologies affect children's ability to learn? And how do the new technologies help children create their identities?

One of the projects at the Georgetown site features a multi-user domain called TVTOWN. Children participating in the project create "avatars," or alternative identities for themselves, and then use emotion and action menus to interact with other children online. The goal is to see how children build their identities and present themselves to each other.

Educational Television

When it comes to television, much of the research so far has focused on the negative impact it has on children's development. Brian L. Wilcox, PhD, chair of APA's Task Force on Advertising and Children and director of the Center on Children, Families and the Law at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has summarized the literature about the effects that televised violence, sexuality and advertising have on children.

The news isn't good. Take violence, for example. While not unanimous, says Wilcox, the consensus is that exposure to violent content has generally negative effects on children's attitudes and behaviors. "Probably the clearest evidence we have that television influences children's thinking and behaviour is the fact that advertisers invest literally billions of dollars trying to influence the perceptions, choices and

behaviours of children through advertising," says Wilcox⁵. "We know very well that they wouldn't be investing the amount of money they do without clear evidence that those messages are influencing kids."⁶ Of course, television's effects can also be positive. Plenty of psychologists have been trying to harness television's power to help educate children. Much of the commonly accepted thought about television and children is wrong, says Anderson a famous psychologist. For example, there's no evidence for the popular assumption that television's rapid-fire editing style has shortened children's attention spans. Anderson also finds himself having to convince producers that they should focus less attention on how a show looks and more on making its content understandable. Now Anderson has an NSF grant to challenge another common idea--that having the television on in the background doesn't affect very young children. "Most exposure to television by infants and toddlers is actually exposure to programs being watched by someone else," says Anderson, noting that in many homes the television is on so much it becomes part of the home environment. "We don't know what that noise and potential distraction are doing to children."⁷

To find out, Anderson is putting children under 3-years old in a lab and watching how they play with toys and interact with their parents with and without a television on in the background. The results could form the basis of an educational campaign for parents. Anderson's own daughter has helped with his research. The fact that she watched a "Blue's Clues" pilot 17 times before losing interest prompted Anderson's research on the effect of repetition. His discovery that repetition reinforces learning resulted in Nickelodeon's strategy of repeating episodes on five consecutive days. However, Anderson says his research interest hasn't made his daughter a television addict. Now 10, Emma prefers to read.

Given this complex question of generational effect of technology, how do we read and or theorize this prospect? And it seems to me that what all adults seems to be obsessed with today is how social media is effecting our children and youth. We are even more concerned because we

do not seem to understand how this whole thing works. Let me try and attempt some tentative theorizing. This may allay some of our fears about social media and use and our children. In the earlier part of this paper, I have tried to point out various aspects of new media and how and where children and youth are interfacing with it. So what is the takeaway?. My attempt here is only a cursory and tentative and a great deal more research needs to be done to come up with a more comprehensive understanding. In order to understand the effects of media on children we must understand the nature of the media and how it functions in the society that we live in. Our specific context may finally determine the effect or at least the extent and nature of the effect and therefore this attempt.

I must point out here, that when I was trying to find studies done in India, I found very little to no research in this field. Some quantitative studies have been done but they are very tentative and very limited in scope. So, the lack of theorization and a lack of commonly agreed-upon first principles places social media studies in a unique relationship with public discourse, and how, unlike most other media studies, Social media studies does not have to "retrofit" critical paradigms developed in the past, and therefore should ideally be able to provide unprecedented insights into the complex interrelationships between textuality, subjectivity and technologies in contemporary cultures.

Given the proliferation of digital technologies it is first important for us to look at not only how digital technologies are changing us, our homes, work places, cafes, villages and towns, but also how we, our specific cultures, languages and our belief systems are changing these technologies. The physical and the digital world seem to be converging in a variety of ways. For example, today if one feels sick one begins to look for explanations of their symptoms on the internet before contacting a doctor; many people pay bills and their bus fare using their smartphones and libraries have begun to change from a physical one to a digital one. How does this interweaving of the physical and the digital effect the society that we live in? And how do we create different

structures to interact with these technologies? In other words, how do we build our towns, how are the roads and bridges built? How do we create different groups and feel a sense of belonging? Questions such as these are very important to ask if we are to understand the phenomenon of the social media and how it interacts with people and institutions and how it in turn determines the way we interact with it and with others around us.

One of the most important areas to be looked at is that the traditional sites of knowledge production have shifted. They have shifted from the physical spaces of the University, the school, the family to the digital realm of the internet and the social media. However, the digital spaces that are created as a result of this cater to the physical world of people and societies. Thus the space within which Media exists today is one of “hybrid practice and Representation”.

This is, in a way, a replication of the post-modern condition that was debated in the 90s. One of the most important characteristics of the post-modern condition is the proliferation of signs and their endless circulation, generated by the technological developments associated with the information explosion. These technologies have in turn created an ever-increasing surplus of texts, all of which demand our attention in varying degrees. The resulting array of competing signs shapes the very process of signification, a context in which messages must constantly be defined over and against rival forms of expression as different types of texts frame our allegedly common reality according to significantly different ideological agendas.

Both television and the social media are obviously central tropes in today's age of information. Many critics both past and present, the left and the right have argued that these technologies have responsible for the devaluation of meaning – the reduction of all meaningful activity to mere “non-sense” to a limitless tele-visual universe that has taken the place of the “real”. Such critics as Alan Bloom, and Jean Baudrillard have made claims about the destructive powers of the media and “mass-culture”⁸. The former has claimed that television

has brought about the ruin of true morality and learning. The latter has claimed that contemporary culture is a culture of endless simulations in which reality simply disappears. What, however is more interesting is that in Bloom's view, the culprit is not television alone but the more general democratization of culture, which threatens the elite values that once formed the basis of real learning and thus the acquisition of truth. But for Baudrillard, technology (especially television) is cause as well as symptom, allegedly constructing a seamless realm of simulations that hinder our acquisition of the *really real*. This I believe is what produces the endless repetition of the same question of whether the act committed was really real.

What then is happening is not that all these various technologies are producing the same response, but in fact because of the democratizing character of the technologies, they become absorbed into the category of the already familiar that produce an initial disorientation that quickly become manageable or *secondarized* through different strategies of absorption as they are worked over by popular texts and popular audiences. The medium may be the message, but twenty minutes into the future, the technological novelty is already in the process of being absorbed. This process of *secondarization* involves the manipulation of the array of texts operating within it – TV, Internet, Cinema, songs bestsellers and so forth – that demonstrate an increasingly sophisticated knowledge of the conditions of their production, circulation and their eventual reception⁹. This becomes more apparent when one sees how social media works, the site of production of information and the intimate knowledge of the process of circulation and reception. However, when this message crosses over to main stream television and other news media it becomes hybridized and re-represented in a different practice.

The all pervasiveness of different strategies of rearticulation and appropriation is one of the most widely discussed characteristics of the post-modern cultural production. Umberto Eco has argued that this kind of articulation is ironic in

nature and is the articulation of the “already said” which is the distinguishing feature of post-modern communication. In this often quoted example, Eco insists that he can no longer make innocent statements. A lover cannot tell his beloved, “*I love you madly*” because it would very probably produce only a laugh or in the day of social media be picked up and re-represented. But if he wants to make such a declaration of love, he could say, “*As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.*” The later indicates a mutual awareness of the “*already said*”. This is what accounts for the diversity of the possible strategies for re-articulation in which the past is not just accessed but hijacked given an entirely different cultural significance than the antecedent text had when it first appeared. What is interesting and as some might say, post-modern in the simultaneity of these competing forms of re-articulation – the “*already said*”¹⁰ is being constantly re-circulated, but from very different perspectives ranging from nostalgic reverence to vehement attack or a mixture of these strategies. Linda Hutcheon argues very convincingly that what distinguishes post-modern re-articulation of the past is their ambivalent relationship to the antecedent text, a recognition of the power of certain texts to capture the imagination, but at the same time a recognition of their ideological or stylistic limitations.¹¹

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