

When paradigm changes challenge applied research: the case of children, media and public governance

A personal journey

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Abstract

Throughout my career as an academic and researcher in the area of children and technologies I have witnessed in this ever-evolving landscape the use of many scientific perspectives in the quest to better understand the cultural creative and educational implications of these technologies in the everyday lives of our children. After briefly describing some of these models I will address the challenges I encountered in trying to match my paradigmatic approach with the expectations of public funding agencies and moreover with the expectancies of the decision makers.

Keywords: policy makers, public governance, funding agencies, media effect paradigm, evidence based approach, active audience, reception studies, ethnographic turn, sense-making, cultural map, ecological validity

When beginning one's career in research and this possibly even more in the area of children and media we often aspire, as young academics, that our work be relevant not only to better understand the cultural creative and educational implications for children but also to share these with those who make policies and are in charge of public governance in the media environment.

Throughout my career, which has now spanned more than four decades, I have seen many changes and transformations on how academics focus their research in the field of media and children. In this paper I will attempt to present some of the different changes I have witnessed, through my own personal experiences, of the "scientific gaze" in this field. Specifically I will address how often different scientific perspectives on "children and media" differently match the expectations of

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public funding agencies and the expectancies of the decision makers. In particular I will focus on the never-ending quest by these entities to find data able to sustain the so-called policies.

My earliest research experiences were in the early 1970s in America in the era of the Surgeon General's Committee on Television and Violence (Murray, 1973; Comstock & Fisher 1975), which received the mandate to lead a major American research program in this field. The principal aim of this major funded undertaking was to investigate how vulnerable children were to media violence.

Although many think this was the first time such governance issues were raised to protect children from the influence of media, some 40 years earlier the Payne Fund studies had raised similar questions looking at, in 1933, the issue of the influence of Films on attitudes about violence, stereotypes and aggressive behaviors (Jowett, Jarvie & Fuller, 1996).

What was then and even now commonly assumed was that the best policies and practices were those that could rely on information and facts. Yet of course not any kind of knowledge: accurate, complete, generalizable and reliable scientific knowledge was and still is today often assumed to be the only kind of knowledge on which decisions concerning policies and practices should be based. This procedure is often called evidence-based decision-making or evidence-based practices (Nevo & Slonim-Nevo, 2011).

There were obviously in the early 1970's a number of paradigms to frame research but the "media effect paradigm" dominated, in America mainstream research on children and media studies, particularly the experimental cognitive psychological approach.

An assumption that was - at that time - taken for granted: that one can control all or many of the intervening variables and find the effect of an independent variable (- generally TV content) on a dependent variable (e.g. a child's social behavior or cognitive performances).

The "media-effect" model thus was the dominant paradigm in the literature whether research looked for direct or indirect effects. Interestingly enough this approach - to investigate what were the effects of TV exposure on children's cognitive and social behavior - perfectly fitted the requests or expectations of policy makers and legislators in this area. Once scientific research had identified what caused what, it was relatively easy to outline justified guidelines or norms that would regulate media content and consumption by children. Governmental institutions as well as parents would then be able to intervene and regulate children's media content and consumption on the bases of scientific evidence.

In some sense the "effect paradigm" was more than a scientific logic relevant for children and media studies: it was a shared way of thinking, a familiar perspective for many, we could even say that it was part of what the phenomenologists would call the Life world, the commonsense thinking, the natural attitude. It is in-

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interesting to note that this approach was quite heavily influenced by research and studies done in such areas as medical, clinical and health care.

Policy makers, laypersons and many researchers, myself included, cultivated what nowadays some would consider a kind of a mythical horizon: the idea that, if one adopted the proper unbiased research design and procedure, it was possible to control and accurately measure how the world affects our children and us. Even if the “world’s impact”, I was interested in, was a limited one - children’s exposure to television content – I nevertheless felt comfortable in thinking that this impact could be accurately and experimentally controlled, scientifically predicted and therefore channeled and translated into policies and practices.

As a young researcher I thus was encouraged to consider such types of research designs for my doctoral theses. At the time the CRTC, which is the regulatory institution in Canada for broadcasting and telecommunication, were on the verge of introducing television in Northern Inuit villages.

Given this unique opportunity, I decided to explore how this first time exposure of television would influence Inuit children in terms of the cultural images they had of themselves and also those they had of other cultural groups they might be exposed to by this “new” media in their lives (Caron, 1979).

If I may open a parenthesis here, as most of us know research seldom goes exactly as expected. In my original design my premise was that I would collect data in these communities specifically at three time periods, a few months before the arrival of television then return a few months after its introduction and 1 year later and compare over time my various observations and scientific measures. My first research design was quasi-experimental with a schedule of behavior observations in a natural occurring setting (Campbell & Stanley, 2015).

Six months before I was to begin my study, the Inuit community leaders requested the CRTC postpone the introduction of TV because they first wanted to have their say on what content would be accessible to their children and also requested that there be an Inuit broadcasting channel (which did not yet exist) included in the services provided.

As a researcher in quest of his Ph.D. with a research design that could not be implemented, the only alternative I had was to see if I could, given the time and resource constraints, introduce television myself on a limited basis in the community. On that basis I re-negotiated a new research project and design with the community leaders, the schools, the parents and the CRTC that was partially funding my research.

The quasi-experimental design used was a classic pre and posttest design with randomization using however two exposure groups. The Inuit children were respectively presented over a one week period either an Inuit content series called “Tuktu” produced by the National Film Board of Canada and which dealt exclusively on their own culture or an American series called “Big Blue Marble” an

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award winning series produced by AT&T showing children's cultures of different lands.

I won't go more into details or report extant findings given it is not the main purpose of this paper but I must mention that the findings from this research - statistical correlations and significant differences found between the two groups' responses for a number of variables- as well as data gathered from observations of their reactions during television exposure were - I would say - revealing of the relative short term effects of television viewing on children's attitudes. Particularly they demonstrated how television content exposure could situationally influence attitudes Inuit children had about themselves and their views on children from different cultures.

Broadly speaking the quasi- experimental design I used and the data I gathered and crafted in terms of the "media effect" paradigm fit quite well with the "evidence based approach" and was appreciated by the CRTC funding agency given they perceived it delivered findings that were not only scientifically valid yet also and moreover useful for regulating.

By the mid 70ies and the early 80ies – I could see the first signs of a paradigm shift slowly emerging with some researchers questioning whether the emphasis should be on what people are doing with media rather than what effect media have on them. An analytical perspective recurrent in Media Studies was the "Uses and Gratifications" approach (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973.) which literally underlined the importance of focusing on the needs and gratifications of the audience thus introducing a notion of an « active audience »

Eco's theory (Eco, 1979) of textual cooperation was also another important influence at the time that gave the reader a crucial role in the actualization of meaning. The text being conceived as producing and implying its own "model reader": that is a system of constraints and possibilities (ex. the incipit "once upon a time") that at the same time requires the active contribution of the empirical reader to make sense of the text and channel his or her interpretative path. This new emerging paradigm was leading media scholars towards what Hall (Hall, 1981) called "an exciting phase" and encouraged researchers to take into consideration the integration of text analysis with audiences' situated interpretation and introduced audience based research within what some named the interpretive turn in social science (MacCabe, 2008; Livingstone, 2012).

This was the time of the use and sometimes abuse of one of the most quoted metaphor in social science literature: Clifford Geertz's metaphor of culture as a web of significance and his plea for defining anthropology as an interpretive science searching for meaning vs. experimental science or nomothetic descriptions seeking general laws. (Geertz, 2003). Although - strictly speaking - there was nothing new in this position as it dates back at least to Dilthey and Weber (Bergstraesser , 1947) nevertheless this strong assertion was perceived as a disruption

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mostly by some research traditions strongly rooted in empiricism. North American based media studies amongst these. These and other different traditions of research emerged and converged in making fertile humus for the “active audience reception study” paradigm.

Not surprisingly the focus on situated active interpretation and sense making by the audience produced a new emphasis on observational studies. At the end of the 80ies we assisted to the ‘ethnographic turn’ in audience studies. A new emphasis was added to naturally occurring media uses and consumptions. Their detailed observation and analysis would make us see what went unnoticed in laboratory, experimental-like studies or large scale surveys (see the work of James Lull and Thomas Lindlof (Lull, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) and in Italy the seminal work of Paolo Mancini (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and Francesco Casetti (Casetti, 1986)).

This ethnographic turn as Livingstone points out involved “the detailed analysis of the culture of the everyday, stressing the importance of 'thick description' as providing a grounding for theory, together with an analysis of the ritual aspects of culture and communication (Carey, 1975) and the practices by which meanings are re/produced in daily life (de Certeau, 1984)” (Livingstone, 1998, p. 3).

A new threshold then appeared to have been reached: the notion of meaning emerged and - although it never totally replaced the notion of effect that continued to frame many empirical research in media studies, - it gained a scientific legitimacy, sometimes even a primacy - over that of causality. From that point on, whether we agree or not with this epistemic shift, we could not do as if it never happened.

One should add however that in the area of children and media studies at least, it was never the intention to completely dismiss the “effect paradigm” or the search of impact and influence of media on children’s development. The effect paradigm still remained then vivid - and in some sense it still is - yet it suddenly appeared to no more be the only possible approach: it clashed with the active audience paradigm and with approaches that take into account the everyday construction of meanings, the specificities of a local reading, and the post structuralism question of what roles we allow media to play in our lives.

This confrontation could not be resolved by simply combining different and complementary methodological instruments. In its essence it was not a methodological confrontation, it was an epistemological one. The issue at stake in fact was not so much to overcome the limits of the quantitative/experimental approaches by simply adding some ethnographic observation as a kind of tribute playing to this new perspective. The issue at stake was radically different and a way quite different to think about social phenomena, amongst children and media.

The active audience paradigm suspended the validity of the basic ontological and epistemological premises the “effect paradigm” was - and still is - based on:

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ceteris paribus sic stantibus, media content shapes minds in ways that can be controllable, measurable and therefore predictable.

Against this vision, the active audience paradigm advanced the idea that media content does not exist as such, rather it is constantly made and remade by audience that selectively pay attention to - and therefore make relevant - certain aspects/dimensions/ topics over the others. By making sense of TV content, audience constantly crafts it. The interpreter's force and even creativity in shaping reality (in our case media content) according to his or her surrounding sociocultural world, becomes the legitimate yet uncontrollable variable that make the process not reducible to terms of media content's predictable effects on children.

Basically the active audience paradigm refused the basic principle of empiricist studies: content and media are not entities whose objective features can be traced and studied once and for all because their features are always "features from a point of view". So whenever a content enters peoples' Life world it is already an experience, a piece of reality imbued with meaning, that in turn is shaped and reshaped according to local contingencies of the audience's everyday life. It was quite a radical perspective that evacuated the role and strengths of the media affordances in channeling the audience's interpretation. But at the time, researchers studying natural audiences were fascinated by this new epistemological venture.

Scientific research framed by the active audience paradigm basically illustrated and documented how this process of local, never-ending and even provisional sense-making takes place in situated interactions.

Irrespective of inner nuances, a problem arises however with active audience based studies although it often goes unnoticed. A number of questions need to be brought into question.

1. What kind of scientific results can be derived from these sense-making oriented research approaches?
2. Do the results and findings produced within the sense-making paradigm appropriately fit the requests of policy makers, funding agencies and even the layperson interested in promoting children's well-being and protecting them from harmful experiences?
3. How can "thick descriptions" of local sense making and the unpredictable strategies ordinary people display in coping with media, say something relevant and generalizable enough to guide public governance policies and local practices?
4. If meaning creation and knowledge construction are basically a local accomplishment, an emerging property of the audience's activity rather than the predictable output of the text-mind encounter, how can we establish policies and govern practices?

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5. How can public agencies whose mission is to govern media content and exposure rely on research data telling them - at the end – the user makes the difference and moreover this kind of research cannot be generalizable?

Scientific findings coming from the active audience approach at first look may appear of little use as a solid base to justify or orient policies and practices

To address these questions how then does one define one's research while navigating this moving epistemic landscape and respond to the challenges presented by the interpretive turn in social science and the active audience paradigm in media studies.

Having to take into consideration such paradigm shifts researchers must also acknowledge that he or she is a product of his or her sociocultural environment, local constraints and personal engagement. As researchers our aspirations are, for many, to accomplish work that is relevant for policies and practices and allow for a better understanding of the environment our children live in and hopefully be useful to fellow researchers and policy makers.

A few years ago a governmental institution called the Régie du cinéma that has the mandate to assign certification, classification and ratings to the film and video industry approached me. Ratings as we all know are conceived to inform parents and adults in general of the social, although we should say the anti- social values, that might be in film and video content children and teenagers might be exposed to. It is somewhat similar I would say to the work done in many countries where rating agencies and public governance generally rate content according to age suitability and the presumed/anticipated effect video content might have on children of a certain age.

The whole rationale of the rating systems as such is mostly grounded on the effect paradigm: film, videogames or television programs may be unsuitable for viewers of a given age because we assume as a society that their content would have a detrimental effect on them. Issues that have most commonly been raised are violence, sexualization, vulgar language, body image, stereotypes etc.

Agencies such as the Régie du cinéma strongly rely on research demonstrating that, all other variables being controlled, exposure to content of a certain type is likely to produce certain effects on children or teenagers. And with this in mind they typically define their research agenda as including:

- Content analysis studies revealing an accurate picture of content features,
- Review of literature of studies producing evidence concerning the effect of some selected content characteristics on children's cognitive processes or social behaviors –
- Large scale studies gathering information on parents' and/or children's perception and opinions.

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The Régie du cinéma wanted us to investigate if as an institution they were still relevant in this new interconnected world where young people have easily access to all the films and videos they may want to see directly on their computers and mobile devices.

However the first thing they expressed to us as an important need for them was inspired by the “direct effect” evidence based paradigm: their request was to report studies that had investigated on the effects of films on young people now that these could be accessed at home in non conventional theatrical release ways.

Given the state of the literature on this question and the almost absence of studies that actually discriminate on sources of exposure, our challenge was to first sensitize them to a better understanding of the paradigm shift that had occurred over the years and propose to them a different research design that could better provide some answers to their main question.

When we agreed to first do a preliminary literature review on this issue we insisted on the benefits of also considering a three-part field study approach to see what families and children did with media content in their everyday life and through their everyday interactions. It took much convincing on our part to persuade them that this might be more useful and pertinent to their concerns than any experimental design or wide quantitative survey.

We might ask why did they at first have hesitations to give us such a mandate? The answer relies on what was mentioned previously:

First, “the media effect paradigm” was and still is consistent with commonsense thinking and laypersons epistemologies whereas a constructionist perspective is less so.

Second: notwithstanding the growing amount of research sensitive to the audience’s situated sense making, correlational studies, experimental studies and content analysis studies are still quite present and their results still very appealing as they appear to perfectly fit with the need of evidence –based decision making and policy implementing.

Third, there still is an underlying positive bias toward numerical representation of a given phenomenon, such as video content effect on children’s minds or development. Numbers and, especially large numbers, are perceived as objective representations of how reality is or could be under certain controlled circumstances. Numbers evoke precisions over indeterminacy, certainty over uncertainty and clear-cut reality over fuzzy phenomena.

Without going into the details of our study, allow me simply to describe the underlying approach we used to persuade this institution to fund us.

First we proposed that we would go in family homes to better understand the intra family dynamics and how they were expressed when they had to regulate and mediate media content choices. This was done with in situ interviews and diaries.

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Then we proposed that young people themselves collect information on their media practices and attitudes and opinions using video cameras in their other social environments such as at school, with friends at neighbor's homes. Finally we proposed to ask the older children of our sample (14-16 year olds) to become themselves evaluators of media content so that we could have their point of view on such a sensitive domain as media regulation for children under a certain age. What would they consider appropriate or not and moreover why? What were the moral horizons, sociocultural values yet also needs, expectations and “web of significance” according to which they made sense of media contents?

We asked them to classify a corpus of films and video games and decide how they would regulate this content for themselves but also to rate this content for their younger siblings

Obviously as you have already guessed this was an audience based approach, with its focus being on how family members coped with the Régie du cinéma ratings in their everyday interactions with their children. The warnings, icons and alert surrounding film, television and videogames worked in fact as paratext surrounding the text and supposedly channeling the audience interpretation by the audience.

So instead of imagining to measure what the rating effects were on young viewers and their parents (for instance the so called paradox effect, that consists in increasing the attractiveness of a film rated for older viewers), we studied how they make sense of the tools provided by this public governance agency.

Some results we found were quite surprising. For instance we discovered that the ratings as such were actually a topic in family interaction that gave rise to discussion around values, moral horizons and even cultural identities. We also discovered that parent' perceptions of the rating systems largely depended on how they considered themselves as the ultimate arbiters of their children's moral development. Therefore parents considered the ratings as highly questionable - although and in some sense paradoxically - they also relied on it when they could not supervise their children's media consumption or as a simplified cultural map helping them to navigate in their children's media landscape (Caronia & Caron 2011).

In a few words the role of the rating systems in family everyday life appeared to be complex, nuanced, polymorphic and highly contingent: hardly presumable in terms of generalizable effects.

We provided the Régie du cinéma with our findings - in terms of interpretation of families' discourses and practices yet also with written verbatim they could read and - most importantly - also see with video summaries: this part of the research report in form of visual representations was a way to communicate with “in their own language” and allow them to see how children and their friends talked

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about ratings and hear directly from the parents in their own words what they thought of the role of this governance institution.

This was also accompanied by our analysis of how this information could be translated into actions. So the sum of these findings allowed them to have the researchers interpretation but more importantly also allowed them to make their own interpretation of the data because they had access in a convivial way to parts of the raw data with its entire local cultural flavor. Something large quantitative studies seldom permit.

The kind of data we provided was a “Thick description of local processes of sense making”: no generalization was really possible, yet data had a high degree of ecological validity and - as analogous ethnographic studies in everyday family life - they provided an insight on naturally occurring ways to cope with media.

Based on this research the Régie du cinéma decided they needed to develop material and a cursus of information that would be provided in schools for children and parents so that the work they did as a regulatory institution would be better understood and more useful. They chose to empower children and their parents with knowledge that would allow them to make choices.

Our study was thus judged extremely useful not to make new laws or regulations that would be applied to all but to allow for a better understanding of the governance approach of the institution.

In some sense we did not provide what the stakeholders had initially requested from us, we never demonstrated what the effects of the actual rating system were nor that for countering certain effects the Régie du Cinéma would need to take x, y, z actions.

What we delivered was a lively articulate picture of how different families differently coped with the texts and the paratext added by the Régie du cinéma to address suitability and index a moral judgment. Yet we had to negotiate with our stakeholders to commit to our research design and methodology and “enlighten” them toward the usefulness of an active audience, ethnographic approach by recognizing its limits but also its advantages.

Conclusion

As social scientists interested in applied research we may ask ourselves what should be our leading paradigms to better-fit expectations of policy makers yet also of practioners and laypersons?

When we worked within the media effect paradigm there was no inconsistency or epistemic divergence between the research design, the form of the results we provided and the expectations of policy makers. As we say in French “tout se tient ou se tenait”: the effect paradigm and consequent research designs and results had

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cultivated an illusion of being able to control reality and nourished our faith in scientific knowledge as solid bases for evidence –based decision making. With the advent of the interpretive turn in social science this “perfect fit” broke: there is an undoubtable gap between studies in this stream and the request for scientific data relevant for policies and practices. What appeared to be a perfect fit between scientific paradigms and social requests and a smooth transition in scientific literature from research findings to the famous “implication for policies and practices” became a “wrinkled interaction”.

Although fascinating, the epistemological fracture, created by the active audience paradigm and its critiques concerning the lack of ecological validity of media effect research, missed a point: the extreme difficulty for this paradigm to frame applied research and generate scientific knowledge immediately relevant for policies and practices.

Yet the examples presented suggest there is a way to make a relevant link between audience based research and governance issues would they be public governance or family and school governance.

This path consists in making the stakeholders and policy makers better understand the relevance of what goes unseen in experimental or large scale studies: the laboratory irreproducible everyday work of making meaning of an already crafted reality.

As the research reported on the rating system revealed, content as well as their rating do make a difference although how they make that difference is - strictly speaking - not perfectly predicable as such as it depends on what people do with this input according to their frames of references, culture and local minds.

Over the years there have been a number of shifts in paradigms with some of them raised often in reaction to past approaches, trying to replace them and become the ‘only’ new way to do research. Reductionism is never the solution: researchers should rather consider that social life is a multifaceted phenomenon with relatively stable yet also emerging properties and that our environment is ever changing and that we must welcome these ever new challenges.

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