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Mobile media and children

Leslie Haddon

Abstract

This article explores a range of research issues relating to children and mobile media, including the potential growth of children's screen time, the regulation of children's use of these media, the challenge of managing increasing media options, effects on children's perception of time, problems posed for parental surveillance and the domestication of mobile media within peer groups. All of these are viewed in the context of broader societal change, evolving norms of childhood and parenthood, cross-cultural variation and the existence of diversity amongst children and youth.

The newness of mobile media

If we take a broad definition, mobile media are not so new. In the early 60s I can remember Sunday evenings spent listening to a transistor playing Radio Luxembourg in the back of car with some crisps and lemonade while my parents were in the pub with my aunt and uncle. Mobile media were clearly being used even then to occupy children. More portable cassette players appeared later, as did Walkmans, portable games, portable DVDs and various portable computer platforms such as laptops and now iPads. This is not to mention the various facilities added to mobile phones over the years and the prospects for mobile TV (for potential research issues related to this device, see Green & Haddon, 2009). It is important to appreciate how mobile media have appeared gradually because there are often claims about the unique experiences

of the current generation of children when in fact practices developed (and were negotiated with parents and other adults) over time by different generations of children and youth.

More screen time

Arguably mobile media are increasingly on the research agenda mainly because of the multiple uses of the mobile phone and now smartphones as platforms, and more specifically their role in accessing the internet and various apps. But the above history of devices means that children's use of mobile media raises issues broader than those related to the online world. For example, the expansion of mobile media may potentially lead to children spending more time engaged with media in general, here specifically (small) screens. This has to be seen against a longstanding backdrop of concerns (including parental ones) about the extent of children's screen time, originally TV time, and how this needs to be balanced with other activities in children's lives (Winn, 1977' on TV; Turkle, 1984, on computers). Or consider the negative reaction of parents when children sometimes withdraw into screen activities rather than interacting with those around, as parents on occasion think they should. But as one child spoke for others, withdrawing into media can be a strategy '*if you're somewhere where you don't want to be*' (Haddon & Vincent, 2009, p.44). The availability of ever more mobile media can exacerbate this tension, or at least make more visible parents' and children's different perspectives.

Regulation of mobile media

Another more generic issue concerns the different levels of regulation of mobile media use. This can be at the level of parental mediation: given that mobile phone theft from children is already an issue, what rules do parents make about when children (of different ages) can carry even more expensive devices, such as

smartphones and tablets, with them in different social spaces? And how should children use them (e.g. how discretely versus some children's potential desire for conspicuous consumption amongst their peers). In addition, we have to consider other forms of social, and sometimes institutional, regulation of ICT use in different types of spaces, as shown in studies of the early Walkman (du Gay, 1997), as well as in studies of mobile phone use in restaurants (Ling, 1997), on transport (Ito, 2005) and in schools (Haddon & Vincent, 2009) - and specifically the use of the camera phone feature (Green & Haddon, 2009). How does the regulation of children's (and adults') mobile media use in different spaces evolve in the face of ever more multi-functional platforms?

Managing more complexity

Meanwhile, the sheer proliferation of mobile media and of the functionality of specific devices simply leads children to face a more complex set of options: to text or use IM, to view on a small screen or wait until a larger screen is available, to use the smartphone's camera or a dedicated digital one (Green & Haddon, 2009). Of course we can ask, in various circumstances, when do children use what and why. But this also raises the broader question of exactly how they manage this complexity, this larger repertoire of possibilities, and indeed negotiate between themselves - i.e. when it is socially appropriate, or 'cool', or seen as technologically sophisticated to use one option rather than another? How much social skill is required here, how is it acquired, at what age and with what effort and how do the above social norms emerge amongst peers?

Perceptions of time

Or to take a slightly different perspective on this larger repertoire, there is a literature looking at adults' time use in relation to their subjective perceptions of time,

specifically the sense of being under time pressure or harried (Southerton, 2003). One of the arguments about why this occurs is that people are increasing packing more (fragmented) activities into their lives for various reasons. Arguably ICTs, including mobile ones, facilitate this process even further (Eriksen, 2001; Kingma & Boersma, 2002) - a point noted originally about the mobile phone being used to fill 'dead time' (Perry et al, 2001).   We could at least ask equivalent questions of children. Admittedly sometimes they are filling otherwise 'boring time' (such as long car journeys) (Haddon and Vincent, 2009) or 'hanging out' (boyd, 2010) and sometimes we even admire the abilities of young people to multi-task. But there remain questions about the general time perceptions of (different) children – is childhood sometimes becoming more harried and what part might mobile media play in this respect?

Parental surveillance

One of specificities of children is the power relations they have with adults, and especially parents, experienced in terms of financial or other constraints (e.g. the rules about mobile media use noted earlier). Hence, in the existing literature on children and ICTs we find an extended discussion of parent-child interactions, and within that how parents manage or 'mediate' their children's technological and media experiences (Kirwil, Garmendia, Garitonandia, & Martinez, G-M., 2009). One strand of this has noted how increasingly difficult it is for parents to (physically) monitor their children's ICT use, originally because of that use taking place in a private 'bedroom culture', at least in some parts of the world (see Bovill & Livingstone, 2001). But such surveillance is also made more difficult by portable media. This was original discussed in relation to children's communication by mobile phone, including texting, which enable young people to organise their social life beyond the view of their parents (Ling, 2004). This obviously meant more privacy from young people's

own perspective. But increasingly this also applies to the way devices like smartphones can enable more online activity beyond the view of parents (or other adults), raising concerns about what young people can access (e.g. porn) or how they might be interacting with others (e.g. cyberbullying) (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009).

Norms of childhood and parenthood

To put this into a wider perspective, parental, and other adult, interactions take place against a backdrop of wider discourses about children. This certainly includes a history of concerns about ICTs (Critcher, 2008) that can extend to mobile media (e.g. yet more screen time, as noted above). But the new sociology of childhood literature sensitises us to the ways in which childhood (and parenthood) are social constructions that can be somewhat different cross-culturally and that can also change over time (e.g. James & Prout, 1997). As a specific example, as younger and younger children acquired mobile phones there were discussions and parental ambivalence about the age at which children 'should' be allowed to have such devices (Ling & Helmersen, 2000). Nowadays one can imagine equivalent discussions about the age at which children are responsible enough to be trusted with their own smartphones, notebooks or tablets. As another example, does official advice to parents about how parents should be mediating mobile media have to change when monitoring the use of such portable media becomes more difficult? What do parents need to be aware of, not just about what children can do online but about what they can do with various apps?

The context of broader social change

The above indicates that parents may be making choices about how they should react to children's mobile media, but they do so as broader societal changes occur in relation to childhood - and in fact the advent of new ICTs is just part of that evolving picture. For example, arguably parents' willingness to buy mobile phones for their

children took place at a time (and in certain Western countries) when many children were regularly (physically) mobile, attending extra-school activities and visiting friends' homes (Haddon, 2004). This raised new logistical challenges, including those associated with picking children up in the car, which could themselves be facilitated by the mobile phone. That same general context could have implication for the attractiveness of mobile media more generally: for instance, if children who are underway for whatever reason, can use their GPS so that they do not get lost, look up transport timetables or, as noted earlier, fill in 'dead' travelling time. To take another example, there are claims about trends towards a de-traditionlization of the family, involving more negotiation with children, and arguably more trust (summarised in Williams and Williams, 2005, evaluated in Haddon, 2012). If true, that broader development may have a bearing on the specific mediation of mobile media use, especially as some traditional approaches such as physically monitoring use become more difficult and as other approaches, such as electronic monitoring or filtering, can run counter to parental efforts to foster a trusting relationship.

Cross-cultural variation

The cross-cultural variation in childhood experiences can be illustrated in a number of ways. Although in many countries there may be media rich bedrooms, where ICT use in the home is important, this does no apply to everywhere and the home is not always that kind of place for children to socialise (e.g. Ito, 2005, on Japan). Hence, in some more generally outdoor-oriented cultures portable media may have somewhat different meanings for young people. To take another example noted earlier, the extent to which ICT is regulated in public spaces (e.g. young people speaking on the mobile phone) may vary in different societies. But this may also be true for portable media more generally. For example, in societies where there is more stress on the

need for children to spend time training in the education system might mobile media be seen as more of a potential distraction by adults?

Domestication among peers

If power-relations with adults constitute one of the specificities of childhood, the role of peers, more so for older children, has increasingly become its other defining feature. Yet even this, it has been pointed out, is in part a historical construction with ever longer schooling placing children of the same age together, characterised as 'institutionised ghettoisation', such that they have less contact with older non-peers (boyd, 2010; Ito, 2010). Research on the use of mobile media clearly needs to take into account the influence of this collective peer element in order to understand, the domestication of technologies at this level (Haddon, 2004). What are fashionable devices and practices amongst peers – such as ways of using mobile media to develop your own and access other profiles on social networking sites or in terms of what to download and upload (see Mascheroni et al, 2011)? And how do different youth position themselves in relation to those peer norms?

Diverse youth

Finally, if the above stresses what is common within cultures we also need to appreciate the diversity of children within them (Ling & Haddon, 2008). In this respect terms such as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) and 'network generations' (Tapscott, 2008) are as misleading as discussions of 'youth culture' in the 1960s, implying more homogeneity than really exists. Children are gendered children, they are of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, all of which can have bearing up how they act, how they are treated and what they can access and use. Moreover, from the perspective of a digital divides existing amongst children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007), are there ways in which those children with more

mobile media, or mobile media of a certain kind, are more advantaged than other children? This in turn may reflect the fact that children have different levels of technological skills and indeed motivations (Holmes, 2011), in contrast to a rosy image of competent children universally embracing all new technologies. Hence, a more fine-grained analysis is needed as regards how different children find their own paths through the growing possibilities offered by diverse mobile media.

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