

Parenting in the media fast lane: The impact of new and traditional media on Australian mothers of young children

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Abstract

At no time in history have Australian families had more media interaction and “screen time” (Screen Australia, 2011; Nielsen Online, 2008). This fact alone – the omnipresent nature of different media in Australian households – impacts parenting. This is a critical reflection on a formative study into the use and impact of both new and traditional media on parenting. Motivated by an opportunity to present our insights to the State’s leading agency for parenting matters in 2010, the researchers invited a group of Australian mothers to share their insights, concerns and highlights concerning parenting advice and the perceived impact of the media on their parenting. In this paper we reflect critically on literature surrounding parenting and the media, and the outcomes of a focus group and a parenting in the media workshop before moving on to outline a proposed programme of study, focused on the role (particularly new) media plays in influencing mothers’ parenting.

Findings indicate that parents – in this case, mothers – cannot avoid engaging with both new and traditional media. However, mothers use different information channels for different types of information. Mothers are time poor but also depend on the media, in particular the internet, for parenting information and support. These findings have implications for marketers, keen to engage with parents, but also for government departments, whose role it is to deliver accurate, factual and often life-saving information.

Introduction

The media provides us with many versions of what modern families are like – and what parents should strive to be. From *Desperate Housewives* to the *Rafters*, *Modern Families* to the *Simpsons*, the family stereotype is in a state of flux. With two women as Australia’s Governor General and Prime Minister, and a Government focus on “working families”, parenting and women’s role are in the spotlight. At the same time, family consumption of the media, in particular television, video games and the internet has never been higher (Nielsen, 2008). However, how do parents engage with media, and to what extent do they take notice of how they are being portrayed? How do they use the media to their advantage – and what information sources do they perceive as reliable? These are some of the questions that motivated the researchers to embark on this project.

Literature review

Before beginning a discussion of the influence of the media, it is important to define what the media is. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task, particularly given the recent rise of the internet and the changes it has made to the “media landscape”. Even an online dictionary, the MacMillan dictionary, ignores the internet in its definition of “mass media” which is: “newspapers, television, radio etc that communicate news and information to large numbers of people” . A broader definition of the media is “any medium or interface that allows communication to flow between senders and receivers in both directions” (Tench & Yeomans, 2009, p. 648). For the purposes of this research, the broader definition is used as a starting point for discussion.

The “social climate change” of the last 50 years has transformed the way we live and the way children are raised (Savage, 2011). Parenting is – and always will be – in the media spotlight, with childhood obesity, the sexualisation of children, cyberbullying, stranger danger (online and offline) and the risks of too much screen time being common headline-grabbing topics. However, it is not just the sensationalist press pushing these topics. For example, Professor Fiona Stanley, Australian of the Year in 2003 and the Director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, has consistently championed the rights of parents and children and campaigned for more Government funding on early intervention to help parents, recognising that a growing number of children are falling behind on international benchmarks (Savage, 2011; Pincock, 2006). Professor Stanley has cited the following factors as getting worse in Australia: Pre-term and low-weight births, autism, child neglect and abuse, youth unemployment, mental health, drug abuse and obesity (ourcommunity.com.au, 2011).

Writing for *The Age* newspaper, Professor Stanley, who is also the Unicef Australia Ambassador for Early Childhood Development, and Norman Gillespie, the CEO of Unicef Australia wrote:

In a range of 35 measures across the spectrum of health, education and prosperity, Australia, when compared with 27 other rich countries - including Britain, the US and Canada - does not top one category and falls below the average on more than half. Particularly worrying are emerging gaps in three particular areas: early childhood development, high levels of youth suicide, and increasing gaps in our levels of basic immunisation. If not addressed, these anomalies pose real challenges for our society, that threaten a substantial economic and social cost (Stanley & Gillespie 2010).

Much attention has been paid to the influence of the mass media on children and adolescents (e.g. Gentile & Walsh, 2002; Rideout, Vandewater & Martella , 2003), with a strong focus on television (e.g. Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). Evidence from the public health field has shown that televised media strategies can successfully increase community awareness of the risk and protective factors impacting upon health and wellbeing (Sanders, Montgomery & Brechman-Toussaint, 2000), such as the dangers associated with drink driving or binge drinking, as well as the need for a balanced diet. Evidence indicates that these kind of campaigns that can be instrumental in modifying potential harmful behaviours such as cigarette smoking, poor diet, and lack of exercise (Sorenson, Emmons, Hunt & Johnston, 1998). Ironically, television is of also much blamed for its negative impact on long term health, such as its link with stroke, obesity and heart conditions (Dunstan et al, 2010).

Television has also been studied for its association with aggression and violence in children and young people (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis 2005). Linked to the research on television and its negative effects on children, mothers are also recognised in research and our culture as having a “gendered responsibility for food and families” (Zivkoic et al, 2010, p. 375).

Much of the existing body of knowledge is focused on monitoring children’s media habits, traditionally associated predominantly with television (Gentile and Walsh, 2002; Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). However, as the media landscape is changing rapidly, scholars are now turning their attention to new and social media channels (Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010).

Since 1996, household access to various media and communications devices has risen significantly. Internet access rose from just 4 per cent to 67 per cent in 2008, while the proportion of households with computers and with games consoles more than doubled (from 36 to 75 per cent and 16 to 35 per cent respectively). Mobile phone penetration increased from 24 to 80 per cent in 2007. As of 2008, 87 per cent of Australian households had a DVD player, up from 6 per cent in 2000 (Screen Australia, 2011). Data released by Nielsen Online in 2008 emphasised that for the first time Australians were spending more time online than watching TV. Whilst the average weekly TV viewing had slightly decreased to 13.3 hours a week, Australians spend 84.4 hours a week on a range of media and leisure activities, an increase from 71.4 hours in 2006. Considering that the average Australian is only awake for 112 hours a week, it has been suggested that media consumption may have reached saturation time (Nielsen, 2008). An alternative view is that we may be forced to double up and multitask, that is, consume more than one medium at any given time. Across the world in developed countries, the predominance of “screens” has raised alarm bells. In the USA, two out of three six-year-olds and under live in homes where the TV is left on at least half the time, even without viewers present, and one third live in homes where TV is on almost all or “most” of the time (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003).

There has been some research on the media’s influence on the development of self image, including issues of weight loss and gain, of particularly teenagers (e.g. Field et al, 2001). However, there appears to be an apparent lack of insight into the media’s influence on parents and parenting, which is what this study aims to address. Theorists in the past have recognised the impact of the media on society with “agenda setting theory” (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) arguing that the media (in this case the news media) has a large impact on society with the choice of stories considered newsworthy and the prominence and space given to material.

Therefore, given the recognition that the media is increasingly impacting on families and children and the limited studies into how parenting is influenced by the media this exploratory study sought to ask the following questions

- How do mothers of young children, at the front line of parenting, consume media?
- What is the relative impact of the media on parenting?
- Which media do mothers choose as “credible” sources for information?

This project was motivated by an invitation to present to a group of Government and not-for-profit employees in the parenting and child health and development sector, organised by the WA Department for Communities. With the broad guidance of the seminar's working title "It takes a village the media to raise a child", the researchers set out to get a better understanding of existing research on parenting and media.

Methodology

Despite a wide range of existing studies, it emerged that previous research had been primarily on how families consume media, with particular interest being paid to how the media influences children – both in positive and negative ways. However, there appears to be a lack of insight into the impact the media has on parenting.

The researchers consequently decided to conduct a single case study into parenting and the media in Western Australia, the State both authors are based in. As an exploratory study, the aim was to provide new insights, a better understanding of parenting and media related issues and a direction for future research. As part of the case study the researchers conducted a two hour focus group, with eight mothers aged between 31 and 43. While one mother had children who were 5, 9 and 11, all of the other mothers had two or more children in the toddler, pre-primary and early primary age group. Due to time restrictions, this was a convenience, snowball sample, recruited via a Playgroup WA e-mail database and consequent word of mouth. Recognising these women's time restrictions, we arranged a private room in a local bar, with the aim to create a pressure free, friendly and relaxed environment. An incentive of a gift voucher raffle was used. Mothers are recognised as having a "gendered responsibility for food and families" (Zivkoic et al 2010, p. 375), hence the decision to target mothers. The women were from mostly Perth Western suburbs, representing a relatively well off socio-economic group.

To guide discussion in the focus group, the two researchers used a set of questions developed for the purpose after a review of the literature and guided by the research questions. The questions for the focus group are available from the authors on request. However, the questionnaire was used as a guide only and the women's comments allowed for other areas of enquiry to develop. During the focus group, one of the researchers led the discussion using the questions. The other researcher took extensive notes. The researchers recorded the discussion using one hand held tape recorder and one digital recorder. Ethics approval was obtained from the researchers' University for the questionnaire and research. The comments were transcribed by the researchers. With interviews and focus groups, having good interpersonal skills and being adept at social interaction is important (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Given the researchers' professional experience as communicators, the researchers are believed to have good interpersonal skills.

This focus group was initiated as research for a seminar presentation at the "Parenting and the Media" Forum in February 2010, followed by engaged discussion with attendees. The study design and analysis were supported by a comprehensive literature review and qualitative document analysis

(including media coverage). The advantages of focus groups include that they are highly efficient (in one hour the evaluator can gather information from eight people instead of one person) and the very nature of the group exerts some quality controls on data (Patton, 2002). In conducting a focus group a facilitator has to be aware of a number of specific issues including whether the focus group should be structured or unstructured, the logistics, group composition and the processes of conducting the focus group (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001).

A key advantage of focus group methodology for interpretive researchers is in learning how respondents talk and construct their own understanding about the phenomenon of interest (Carson et al., 2001). The most important feature of the focus group is its ability to reveal complex behaviours and motivations and this is the direct result of the interaction within the group (Carson et al., 2001). An information sheet outlining the nature of the research was given to every focus group participant. The participants were reminded in writing and verbally that their participation was voluntary and they did not need to answer any questions if they did not wish to do so.

The transcripts of the focus group were independently coded by both researchers for themes. Once the transcript was made and copied for safe keeping, the next major step was to read the data, getting a general sense of the information (Creswell, 2003). Open coding was employed where the data was broken down and initial categories formed. Axial coding involves refining and developing the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Finally selective coding – usually occurring during the third reading of the data (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001) - involved making an interpretation of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2003). Making meaning involves the researchers' personal interpretation but also can be meaning derived from a comparison of the findings with existing theories and literature (Creswell, 2003).

Findings and discussion

The original brief from the Government agency that invited us to present on parenting and the media was to discuss how parents are impacted on by the way they are being portrayed in the media. However, we discovered that mothers of infants, pre-primary and primary age children are simply too busy to consume regular media content, especially television programmes. As our participants explained:

I read. I will take notice if it's written down. However, if it's on TV or radio at a certain time, I can't guarantee I won't miss it.

I could never to plan my life so I can watch a particular programme at 7.30pm.

If consumed, TV programs represented an escape route from the demands of every day life, something our mums could laugh at, breathe a sigh of relief that their children are much better behaved than the ones the *Supernanny* had been called upon for, but essentially not a prime impact on their identity as parents. If parents – or in this case the mums in our focus group – do not

consume regular media programs, where do they receive their parenting advice and support from? This consequently emerged as the focus of our study.

Feeling overwhelmed

The mums in our focus group felt overwhelmed and increasingly cynical of the mixed messages that were communicated via the media. As one participant said:

The front page tells us to take 10 minutes of 'me time' with a bowl of Special K, page 3 tells you about the latest research and how you should continue breastfeeding on demand for at least the first 2-3 years, page 5 tells you to get back to work and continue your career, ..Then you need your family meal times in between your Special Ks...and then on page 7 they tell you you need to be a 'cougar' in bed.... You can't have it all ways!

As a group, they could laugh at this conflicting advice and particularly the State newspaper's perceived obsession with "new, groundbreaking research" into parenting.

It's so sensational. It goes through fads. Whether or not you should attach your baby to you 24 hours a day or whether or not you should leave them to sleep. It goes around in circles – it just depends on who's the loudest specialist at the moment and the media just jumps on to whoever the loudest baby specialist is and they report that – whoever the latest baby guru is they report that until someone else comes along and shouts louder.

However, as researchers we wonder how much contradictory information and pressure on parents in general adds to individual stress levels.

Nevertheless, mums in this group reported that most of the perceived *performance* pressure came from other parents and peers, even from people in public places (e.g. the local bank) who felt the need to question parenting styles. Two mums commented on the internalised *shame* when having to admit to having had a caesarian. Another commented on very public enquiries about breast feeding habits. Mums felt like they were being put under a microscope and critically watched – and judged – by society. The pressure and expectations were highlighted by two participants.

It's hard with your first cos with your first I didn't trust anybody. That's why I read a million books and spoke to a million people.

and

I think the media puts pressure on you to get your child to a certain level – cos you'll read stuff and go, it must put pressure on – especially parents who aren't maybe confident or aren't as intellectually savvy. Or – media savvy.

Peer-to-peer support

So, where do parents get their parenting information from? Our respondents emphasised that mums are increasingly overwhelmed and are struggling to do it all. Television might make it look easy but not everyone can be a Julie Rafter, described by the program's homepage as "a terrific mum, a loving daughter, a wonderful wife, and a great worker" (*Packed to the Rafters*, 2011). Mothers are turning to each other for support – preferably in a face- to-face exchange. This personal, direct exchange was perceived as absolutely crucial.

Peers emerged as *the primary* source of information. Interestingly, these peers can now be found both on and offline. Whilst playgroups have traditionally provided an opportunity to connect with parents of children born within same month, some of our participants had established similar support networks online. These support groups often last for many years.

One participant explained:

I also joined an on-line forum for each of my babies. I still keep in touch with them [the other mums]. They all had babies within the same month – well they were all due in the same month. So I've kept in touch with them... But that's quite good because they are all exactly the same age as your kid.

Participants also highlighted that frequently they had only found out about official support channels and sources via their peers.

Moving online

As parents are increasingly time poor, juggling busy schedules, they are discovering the convenience of the internet. Not all mums in our focus group felt extremely comfortable on the internet. However, most of them reported that they had turned online to seek out information particularly about small illnesses, rashes or behavioral issues. Another use of online was for support with peers on social media sites and in online discussion forums. The fact that information is available 24/7 means that it is accessible on demand and this is a vital consideration, as the participants reported having a small window of time to spend on research (which was often late at night and particularly out of office hours). Official health department websites, social media, discussion forums and blogs were mentioned. One participant reported on accessing medical journals for the latest research insight into health issues.

Most of the participants in the focus group reported they had *googled* symptoms and joined discussion forums to exchange ideas, concern and advice with parents across the country. In the words of one participant: "You wonder what people did before Google". One mum explained that her son broke out into a rash – she went online and looked at various close-up pictures of children with similar symptoms until she was certain that she could identify what was wrong.

One participant commented: “I have used it a lot. If I know there’s one [a virus] going around school or if the doctor says my child has one of those lovely childhood diseases...I use it to find out ways to treat it...I would be on the net for hours and hours.”

Life or death

Some participants also recognised the conflicting nature of information available online. Once serious concerns about the health of their children emerged, most mums quickly turned away from online advice, in the search for direct, local expertise. However chat rooms were also used as a source, with one mum believing her use of a chat room was the answer to a cure for her child’s illness.

In the end of I got onto a chat room, and got the right thing to do so...they were gone within the week... If I hadn’t done that they [the spots] could last for three years, apparently!

Particularly when it comes to what our participants labeled as “life or death” information, parents reportedly rely on Government departments. Similarly, a number of respondents emphasised that they knew where to go for expert, hands-on advice - for example their children’s health nurse or Ngala (West Australian parenting help centre) for sleep issues. As researchers we consequently feel that there is an obvious vital role for crucial health and advice services provided by Government departments and not-for-profit organisations. However, accessibility appears to be a crucial barrier, preventing mothers accessing these more regularly.

In need of support – on and offline

According to our participants, mums struggle; they are confused and under pressure to do it all. They feel they have to live up to unrealistic expectations, such as the image of “yummy mummies”, while continually struggling with information overload.

However, it’s not just mums: focus group participants recognised that today’s dads are struggling with similar challenges:

Dads don’t have it easy either – they are expected to be the bread winner, be hands on with the kids, be present ...and a lot of dads over here work away on the mines.... There is a lot of pressure on men.

One-on-one peer support emerged as crucial. However, online channels increasingly play a role in Mum’s daily struggle to keep up with and find the “right” parenting information and support. Government departments were recognised for critical health situations – hospital emergency departments and the Health Direct (health advice) phone line were two examples. However, parents are searching for reliable information out of office hours online and this has a major impact on how not-for-profits and governments provide their information in an easily accessible, well listed, appropriate format.

Conclusion

The plethora of media options available to Australian households has not necessarily made parenting easier. Mothers still value the information and support provided by Government agencies such as children's health nurses, the emergency helpline (Health Direct) and, in Western Australia, Ngala.

For daily support and advice mothers still turn to peers – on and offline, often with children born within same month – and maintain contact for many years. However, as mothers are increasingly time poor and struggling to do it all, new media has emerged as a vital information source, with mothers googling for childhood illness symptoms and joining discussion forums to exchange concerns and ideas with other mums across the country – and the world. The increasing reliance on the internet by mothers is not surprising, given the previous literature showing Australia's fast adoption of internet technology (e.g. Nielsen, 2008). However, our literature review also showed that little attention had been paid or research conducted into *mothers'* use of new media as an important information source for parenting.

With women recognised as controlling 85 per cent of household spending (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), and the increasing presence of women online, major companies are investing heavily to target women and be seen as a major provider of parenting advice. If Governments and not-for-profit organisations are to provide women with useful parenting advice (and tackle areas such as childhood obesity) they need to step up and invest to utilise social media to reach women. At the parent and the media forum in 2010, Ngala announced it had made its first steps to providing a more interactive website.

Limitations

This is a critical reflection on a formative study into parenting and the media. Insights gained are based on a critical literature review and a single focus group of women, based in Western Australia. At the time, all participants lived in Perth's Western suburbs, an area recognised for its above-average median income, low unemployment and high representation of professionals. Nevertheless, the women's views represent a snapshot of a broad range of parenting concerns and strategies. As researchers we recognised that these women may have expressed their views differently in a peer group than they may have done in an individual interview.

Direction for future research

Companies are tapping into mother's insecurities and desire for information for marketing purposes with marketers recognising the importance of marketing to children and mothers (Sharma & Dasgupta, 2009). A recent example of the recognition of the power of online (and the spending power of mothers) was the rush by major multinationals to sponsor a (mainly) mothers' blogging conference to be held in Sydney in March 2011. Kleenex Mums, Disney, Ogilvy 360° Digital Influence, Rubbermaid, Guardsman and Billie B Brown are some of the high-profile companies wanting to sponsor the conference, which is reportedly sold out (ITWire, 2011). Major corporate entities are creating or co-sponsoring social media sites to influence mothers, for example Kleenex, Huggies and

even Telstra. High-profile bloggers such as Mia Freedman are attracting significant advertising on their sites (see <http://www.mamamia.com.au/>). Meanwhile, some mothers are turning to blogging as a form of self expression and support and some even view this as a “radical act” (Lopez, 2009). Future research could tap into existing data bases such as Playgroup with a more quantitative approach to follow up on themes which emerged from the focus group. How many mums are actively using social media as their preferred information source? What role do Facebook and Twitter play in mothers’ approach to parenting? A more diverse group of mothers would be of interest. Another approach would be to look at the impact of the media on fathers and fathering. A content analysis of major mother blogs/websites could also determine the amount of commercial content and the key issues facing parents who interact online. If we are to tackle the big issues outlined by Professor Fiona Stanley facing children, parents and society, researchers must examine the shifting boundaries and identities for parents in this media saturated environment of Australia and New Zealand in 2011.

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