

# LSE Research Online

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## POLIS media and family report

### Report

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# Introduction

'For most families, the media have shifted in status from a merely incidental, if desirable, element of private life and leisure to becoming thoroughly embedded in families' everyday life, providing the indispensable infrastructure for domestic space, daily timetables and, in consequence, a taken-for-granted mediator of social relations within and beyond the home.' [P5]

What that means is that media have now become an essential part of family life. So anyone concerned about either the family, or indeed, the media, must pay attention to the relationship between the way we live and how we mediate our lives. As one newspaper executive recently told me, a typical 14 year-old girl is the most important person in his life, because he does not know what she is going to do next. And what she chooses to do will have a generational significance for a whole modern way of life predicated on mediation.

In this report we are not looking at the family because it is a convenient category. Instead, we see the family as a vital driver of social change. We are all in a family relationship of some sort for virtually all our lives. When we are, it changes our relationship to communications. It literally alters the way that we mediate our lives in quite a direct, concrete manner. For example:

'...the presence of children in the household matters: parents tend to acquire more media goods when they have children, being generally 'ahead' of the adult population in general, while children pressure parents to keep up to date and to diversify media use according to their growing tastes and interests; overall, it seems, families tend to consider a media-rich home a 'well-provided' for home.'<sup>1</sup>

This report is published at a time of substantial technological and social change. Media and communication technologies are simultaneously diverging and converging, resulting in a complex, fast-changing and increasingly global media environment that pose many challenges for families. It summarises the insights from an extensive, ongoing research project on media in the family across Europe.<sup>1</sup> The point of this report is to map out some trends and explore the issues in ways that will be helpful for anyone concerned about the role of media in society from the point of view of the consumer and citizen.

For many families, widespread access to the internet is transforming their lives. The digitisation of familiar analogue and print-based media, and the proliferation of interactive, peer-to-peer, individualised means of communication seem to be revolutionising communication and social relations within the family and between the family and the wider world. New platforms continue to emerge such as smart phones and tablet computers that are changing when, how and what we do online. They are also changing the way families use other, 'older' media such as television.

At the same time, the family itself is changing. It is increasingly diverse. It has also gone global. That's exciting. But there are also new tensions in the relations between parents and children. It's a long way from either the Victorian model or the 20th Century 'nuclear' family.

This report explores the ways in which:

- Shifts in the structure and dynamics of families have set the scene for media to assume such importance within family life.
- Innovations in the technology, marketing and uses of media and communications have come to represent a 'solution' in some ways and a problem in other ways for today's parents.
- Different types of families, for a variety of reasons depending on their circumstances, engage with the media in different ways within their lives.

In tackling these questions, we want to avoid the simplistic idea that there is only one way that media change impacts upon families. There is not a simple good or bad, right or wrong.

Instead we examine how the institutions and processes of family and social life are increasingly complex. We look at how they are mediated in diverse ways. By avoiding simple claims about cause and effect, we hope to dispense with the often strong public anxieties or moral judgements that tend to accompany them.<sup>2</sup>

First we look at how the family itself is changing. Across all European countries we see new structures emerge and different ways of parenting. Demographic change sees the population ageing while migration influences ideas of identity. Social changes see, for example, more women working and income differences growing. Relationships alter, as well, with new roles for parents, grand-parents and children.

We look at how the changing family is itself creating new media trends. 'An extended youth' means that those 'stay at home children' want personalised media with separate spaces. And because we have fewer children than 'The Special Child' can claim more resources to spend on their media activities. There is the 'inside/outside syndrome' which means that adults worry more about public space so they create a media-rich 'bedroom culture' for children to keep them at home.





And those parents are also expected to support their children's education and their own life-long learning so fuelling investment in digital equipment and skills. And finally, as families reconstruct and extend they need more media that enables them to keep connected.

Then the report looks at the reverse influence. How does media change shape family life? What are media effects? Do new forms of media really make us behave differently? What are the risks inherent in these new media platforms and processes? Is the technology that enables personalised media driving us into more individualised, fragmented real lives? Or does it create more intimacy and shared values but in different forms? What are the new challenges that media creates for parenting itself? What are the new literacies that we need because of this new media? And finally, in what way does it change the idea of the family as citizens?

That section is the meat of the argument but we don't come to hard and fast conclusions. Instead we want to stir debate and prompt more investigation. In our final section of Where Next we (inevitably) call for more research. We suggest that there is a need for a new agenda in policy-making around the media and family. We don't remain entirely neutral. A note of optimism creeps in that hints at possibilities and opportunities as well as threats and dangers.

This report is only part of the story. Polis and the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics realise that this is a rapidly evolving subject. We have also created a Media Policy Project that will tackle some of these issues by bringing our research to bear on topical government media decision-making. We will be returning regularly to this area and we invite you to join in the investigation and debate it creates. We are delighted, for example, that Vodafone have chosen the launch event for this report to reveal their latest initiative to support 'digital parents'.

At a moment when governments are seeking to put more services online and to foster civil society through the internet, it matters that we understand families and the media. At a time when companies are desperate to sell media services and goods to the family it matters that we understand our choices and the risks. The over-arching question is not whether we can, for example, persuade teenagers to consume more news or to watch less pornography, though both things might be good in themselves. The key question is whether digital technologies are building social capital in families or fragmenting and destroying the relationships that can produce happier individuals and stronger communities. This report doesn't give a pat answer to that, because there isn't one. But for anyone who accepts the vital role of media in fostering individual and collective wellbeing, we hope this report will at least provide positive food for thought and action.

**Charlie Beckett**  
Director, Polis, LSE<sup>3</sup>

How does media change shape family life? What are media effects? Do new forms of media really make us behave differently?

## Trends in UK and European families

Changes in the media and communication environment do not occur in isolation, driven simply by technological and market innovation. Rather, they occur side-by-side and interacting with significant changes in the population:

- Demographic changes in life expectancy, fertility rates and migration patterns.
- Socio-economic changes in the structures of employment and education, increased urbanisation and the growth of affluent individualism.
- Relational transformations of gender roles and relations, a decline in household size and a diversification of family composition.

So, European families are changing.<sup>4</sup>

### Demographic trends

- 'The population is **aging**. An increasing proportion of older people accompanied by a **falling birth rate** indicate a shrinking population in the future, with smaller families of one or two children.'<sup>5</sup>
- **Increasing net migration** within and across European member states is resulting in the ethnic, religious and cultural diversification of national populations.<sup>6</sup>
- **New family forms** are emerging, with more foster and adoptive families, multi-generational households, reconstructed families and families without common households, so that relationships must be maintained over extended times and places.

### Social-structural trends

- There is a growing **polarisation** of families according to income: two-earner families are well positioned, while lone-parent households and single-adult households of young or old people often face financial difficulties.
- **Employment patterns** are shifting away from so-called standard employment relationships (full-time, non-temporary, with social insurance) for both men and women.
- Young people **stay at home longer**, given an extended period of education and delayed entry into the workforce.

### Relational trends

- The **proportion of lone-parent** (mainly lone mother) families has grown substantially in the last few decades, and this is in turn linked to a higher risk of poverty and social disadvantage.
- Blurring of **traditional gender relations** – as couples, including young parents, make evident transformations in gender roles, in men's and women's identities, in work/life patterns and in the division of care.
- The **'dual earner-female carer'** model seems to be the most widespread one in Europe, despite the somewhat increased role men are taking in domestic work.
- Family **relationships** continue to play a major role in reproducing social inequalities and in the transmission of social advantage and disadvantage.

Changes in the media and communication environment do not occur in isolation, driven simply by technological and market innovation

### Bedroom culture

'Bedroom culture' – especially among children and young people – refers to the set of conventional meanings and practices closely associated with identity and privacy, and the self has become linked to the domestic space of the child's bedroom in late modern society.

Comparing 6- to 17-year-old children's bedroom cultures across Europe in the Children and their Changing Media Environment project, Bovill and Livingstone note that it is in their bedroom that: media technology and content are appropriated by young people to sustain and express their sense of who they are. This new leisure site raises a variety of questions both for family life and children's media use. 'Bedroom culture' implies that children and young people spend significant proportions of their leisure time at home with the mass media, increasingly screen media, in their own private space rather than communal or family space.



# Family trends shape media use

Since families are changing, the contexts within which media and communication technologies are acquired, used and rendered meaningful in people's lives are, also, changing. An analysis of the place of media in modern life must look beyond both technological innovations in media and markets and beyond individual consumer patterns in order to recognise the distinctive consequences of family structures and practices.

The ways in which family trends shape media trends, above and beyond any straightforward or linear conception of the impact of media on family life, must be understood at both macro and micro levels.

- At the macro level, state provision of welfare, health and education is increasingly replaced by mixed models of provision. These result in demands, at the micro level, for more consumer choice, greater transparency of information, and more individual responsibility.
- Social change generates personal pressures and anxieties. What to value and trust? What will come next? Are we prepared for it? These anxieties dominate the minds of many adults.
- It seems, further, that these anxieties readily become centred on children and child-rearing, with parents worried about the world for which they must prepare their children. Parents are worried too about the task of preparing for when children strive for independence rather than dependence, rights rather than responsibilities, exploration of the new rather than respect for tradition.
- Or so it often seems to parents. Children, of course, take a different view. But for both, the latest media and communication technologies seem to crystallise these concerns, simultaneously offering new ways of living, solutions perhaps to an array of pressing difficulties, which may nonetheless also pose new problems.

So, what are the ways in which family trends shape media use? Here are some key ways in which changing families change our media use:

## 'The special child'

With families having fewer children in each generation, it seems that parents spend more on each child (or, on a sole child), treating them as 'special', and drawing on the rising discourse of child rights to legitimate their consumer/ media-related expenditure.

## Inside/outside

Parental fears for their children's safety in public places encourages equipping the home as a place of leisure to keep them safe at home, resulting in the growth of a media-rich bedroom culture for children; in parallel, the advent of mobile technology enables parents to monitor their children when out and about.

## 'Getting older younger'

While commercial markets have undoubtedly targeted ever younger children for an array of consumer goods from clothing and toys to magazines, mobile phones and electronic games, families have taken up the offer with alacrity, fuelling the charge that children are growing up earlier than before.

## An extended youth

As teenage and even young adult years are increasingly spent in the family home, this creates a demand for multiple, affordable, personalised media goods that allow family members their separate spaces for leisure and communication within the home.

## Extended and reconstructed families

As family structures diverge, family communication must connect and coordinate personal relations over ever-extending places and times, both in order to sustain intimacy and to provide often significant levels of care.

## Informal and lifelong learning

Parents are expected to support informal learning, linking home and school through investment and skills devoted to domestic communication technologies; in parallel, pressures towards flexible labour markets demand a continual updating of information and digital skills among adults of all ages.



Since families are changing, the contexts within which media and communication technologies are acquired, used and rendered meaningful in people's lives are, also, changing

# Media trends shape families

Having mapped the changing parameters of families and the wider society in which they are situated, we can now examine the trends in media and communications. What are the intersections between family concerns and media developments? How should the role and consequences of media in family life be understood?

In 2007, for the first time, a majority (54%) of households in the European Union's 27 nations had internet access, and people's main location for accessing the internet was the home.<sup>7</sup> This is just one, albeit key, example of how the proliferation of communication and information technologies has placed media and digital literacies at the centre of policy priorities. The European Commission's Digital Agenda, launched in March 2010, testifies to the importance of domestic, educational and business uses of digital technologies, especially the internet, for European economy and society.<sup>8</sup>

For most families, the media have shifted in status from a merely incidental, if desirable, element of private life and leisure to becoming thoroughly embedded in families' everyday life, providing the indispensable infrastructure for domestic space, daily timetables and, in consequence, a taken-for-granted mediator of social relations within and beyond the home.

Such changes may be for better or worse. An OECD scoping report on the future of the family observes first that 'recent innovations such as Facebook and YouTube give an inkling of its power to revolutionise social interaction, particularly among young people' but then refers to new technologies as 'potentially disruptive factors'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, there are many popular anxieties regarding the consequences of new media use.

These anxieties must be balanced against the equally dramatic although more optimistic claims regarding the potential of new technologies to mediate and enhance education, commerce, employment, skills and participation, for these too are reshaping policy frameworks and public and private sector practices across Europe and beyond.

In what follows, we summarise eight significant trends in media use, in the backdrop of these complexities and ambiguities – between optimism and pessimism, risks and opportunities, panics and justifiable caution.

## What are media effects?

First, we counter the often technologically determinist and overly pessimistic accounts of media effects. The consequences of media changes are subject to ongoing debate which includes a range of research and debate into the appropriate policy and regulatory responses needed to ensure personal wellbeing and business confidence.

## New media, new risks?

Second, we chart how new, interactive, cheaper, personalised media technologies contribute to a simultaneously diversifying and convergent media, communication and information environment. The wholesale adoption of practices dependent on 'always on', peer-to-peer, multimodal and networked media technologies opens the way to a changed array of opportunities and risks barely understood as yet.

## Shared values or fragmentation?

Third, we overview research which shows how media consumption, especially that focused on mass broadcast genres, continues to support shared values and family intimacy, despite the individualisation exacerbated by new media and the commercialisation of representations. Whether such shared media experiences can overcome tendencies towards fragmentation, distrust and tension depends on multiple factors.

## New challenges for parenting

Fourth, we consider how the changing media environment poses new challenges for parenting, and how parents draw on the skills, values and attitudes that are important to them in managing or mediating their children's internet use, also acknowledging the considerable difficulties they face in so doing.





#### New ways of learning – new knowledge gaps

Fifth, linking home and society we consider how formal education increasingly incorporates the use of information and communication technologies, while in parallel, informal and lifelong learning are being enabled by e-learning resources and information networks. Whether or not these are sufficient for a flexible life course and labour market remains to be seen.

#### New relationships of in/dependence?

Sixth, in recognition of the hopes that health, ageing, care and support services may increasingly rely on the spread of networked and domestic technologies, we consider whether media developments can positively improve the present balance of domestic versus professional (ie, paid for) support and expertise, or whether technologies that enhance independence for the cared-for may result in increased burdens on the carers.

#### New literacies

Seventh, as many sectors of society incorporate digital platforms and connectivity into their core activities, new skills and literacies become important. The opportunities focus on enhanced participation and advancement (for individuals) and increased transparency and accountability (of institutions). The risks, however, focus on exploitation, surveillance and knowledge inequalities.

#### Digital citizenship

Last, it is noted that as public and private institutions and ways of life become ever more dependent on mediation via information and communication technologies, these latter are often driven by commercial rather than public priorities, especially in a deregulatory climate. The outcome may be an increasingly commercialised infrastructure underpinning family and community life marked by substantial digital divides, notwithstanding widespread policy interest in 'digital citizenship' or 'digital participation'.

### Mobile media and families

The growing absence of young people from unsupervised public spaces in some countries has led to both a bedroom culture and increased mobility as young people spend time both in peers' homes and in after-school activities. Both trends, arguably, have had implications for children's acquisition of mobile phones. The mobile phone has had mixed implications for parents' ability to monitor their children. They can check on the children when they are out of the home, which is sometimes respected by children and sometimes resisted. Services showing parents the location of children have the potential to raise tensions in this respect. But children can now more easily make their calls and organise their social life beyond parental supervision. There are also some specific concerns about children accessing the internet on the mobile phone, beyond supervision, but at the moment this is not a widespread practice because of the cost of doing so.

## 1. What are media effects?

**Possibly the most contentious issue in relation to children and media is children's susceptibility to media influences. It is a question that divides researchers profoundly over the relations between children's agency and media power. It is argued below that the position of media in family life is complex, and that no single answer should be expected to the question of how media transform children's behaviour.**

Some researchers anchor their investigation in relation to a social problem in childhood (for example, violence, early sexuality or obesity) and then ask to what extent the media are responsible. This prioritises research that seeks clear causes of social problems via rigorous testing so as to alleviate real-world problems. Problematically, demonstrations of media effects reveal modest or inconsistent findings.

Thus, other researchers critique this approach for its often-simple causal theories, for engendering (often inadvertently) moral panics and for positioning the child as 'victim' rather than agent. They may then ask, albeit often only descriptively, how children enjoy media, what they gain from them and how skilled or tactical they are in managing the media's role in their lives. At the same time, and with some justification, they argue that the 'real' causes of those social ills (violence, obesity, etc) are to be found elsewhere in society more than as a consequence of media exposure.

While acknowledging this often fraught history of debates over theory, methodology and findings, Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone's recent literature review of research concluded that, for television, there is a sizeable body of evidence that suggests that televised portrayals of aggression can, under certain circumstances, have a moderate but fairly consistent negative influence on the attitudes and behaviours of children, especially boys.<sup>10</sup>

Similar findings exist regarding aggressive content in film, video/DVD and electronic games, although the body of research evidence is somewhat smaller. These media are, at present, all highly regulated in most developed countries through labelling and age restrictions (or scheduling restrictions in the case of television). It seems possible that the risk of harm will be greater if regulations are reduced or if children spend more time with unregulated media – ie, if and when children view content inappropriate for their age, maturity or media literacy.

Additionally, researchers have long pointed to the media's role in relation to reality-defining effects, arguing that the media provide the frameworks or expectations with which the public understands the world around them. Pertinent theories include cultivation effects (the 'drip-drip' effect of repeated messages), agenda setting (defining what people should think about) and mainstreaming (making certain views 'normal' or standard, while marginalising others).

Again, the evidence for such indirect effects is patchy and not very recent. The difficulty here is that any effect of the media operates only in combination with many other social influences. Furthermore reality-defining effects must be measured not in terms of an immediate impact on an individual but rather in terms of gradual shifts in social norms over years or decades.

Thus simple causal accounts of media effects are rarely straightforwardly supported by evidence. Rather, media effects depend heavily on many other factors and, often, the cultural context is crucial. Indeed, empirical studies frequently find that media exposure accounts for only a small proportion of the variation in attitudes or beliefs across the population. By implication, other factors play a substantial role, although these are not always well researched.

For example, although it seems that exposure to television (or, arguably, television advertising) is associated with children's food choices or behaviour (and, as shown especially in correlational studies, with their body weight), the effect is small. Notably, many other factors – parental food preferences, levels of exercise, availability of healthy food options, poverty and more have all been shown to play a greater role in determining childhood obesity.<sup>11</sup>

**In conclusion, the media are interpreted and appropriated in particular contexts, requiring some recognition of users and audiences as active rather than simply passive recipients. Thus, instead of treating the media as a somehow external or singular institution that 'impacts on' childhood, youth and the family, we note how the institutions and processes of family and social life are complexly mediated (or mediated) in diverse, culturally and historically contingent ways.**



Possibly the most contentious issue in relation to children and media is children's susceptibility to media influences

## 2. New media, new risks?

**Domestic use of the internet continues to grow, especially among teenagers and, increasingly, younger children. Striking recent rises are evident among countries in the Southern and Eastern parts of Europe, outstripping the provision of educational, safety and regulatory infrastructures. The result is a changing array of both new opportunities and new risks of harm.**

Trends in technologies and markets interact with the socio-historical trend towards an extended youth (children entering the workplace later, staying dependent or at home longer), the result being an increase in the provisioning of media rich homes and individualised lifestyles. This is well exemplified by the rise in children's mediated and heavily commercialised 'bedroom culture', and it raises concerns that (mediated) peer culture is displacing children's relations with adults

The rapidity with which children and young people are gaining access to online, convergent, mobile and networked media is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation. Parents, teachers and children are acquiring, learning how to use, and finding a purpose for the internet within their daily lives. Stakeholders – governments, schools, industry, child welfare organisations and families – seek to maximise online opportunities while minimising the risk of harm associated with internet use.

As observed by the EU Kids Online network<sup>12</sup>, diverse and ambitious efforts are underway in many countries to promote digital technologies in schools, e-governance initiatives, digital participation and digital literacy. As many families are discovering, the benefits are considerable. New opportunities for learning, participation, creativity and communication are being explored by children, parents, schools, public and private sector organisations.

Previous EU Kids Online research identified a complex array of online opportunities and risks associated with children's internet use.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the risks of concern to children often are not those that lead to adult anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Also, it appears that the more children go online to gain the benefits, the more they may encounter risks, accidentally or deliberately.<sup>15</sup>

Risks may arise when children are sophisticated, confident or experimental internet users, as observed in 'high use, high risk' countries or when, as in 'new use, new risk' countries, children gain internet access in advance of an infrastructure of awareness-raising, parental understanding, regulation and safety protection.

**So, although the popular fear that the internet endangers all children has not been supported by evidence, there are grounds for concern and intervention. Further, despite the popular rhetoric of 'digital natives', many children still lack resources to use the internet sufficiently to explore its opportunities or develop vital digital literacy skills.<sup>16</sup> Thus it is important to encourage and facilitate children's confident and flexible internet use. A difficult balancing act faces stakeholders: promoting online opportunities without careful attention to safety may also promote online risk; but measures to reduce risk may have the unintended consequence of reducing opportunities.<sup>17</sup>**

Domestic use of the internet continues to grow, especially among teenagers and, increasingly, younger children

### In focus: Findings from EU Kids Online II

The 2010 EU Kids Online survey of 9-16 year olds across Europe concludes that

- Children's experiences of the internet varies considerably across locations and devices; However, the fact that teenagers especially go online at home in the privacy of their own bedroom poses specific challenges to parents.
- The most common risk of children's internet use in Europe is associated with communicating online with someone the child has not met face-to-face before – characteristic of 29% of 9-16 year olds, although only rarely is this risk associated with any harm
- Children's roles can be both as 'victims' and as 'perpetrators' of risks; overall, 19% of European 9-16 year olds have been bullied, online or offline, and 12% have bullied someone else, in the past year.

## 3. Shared values or fragmentation?

**Media consumption, especially focused on mass broadcast genres, continues to provide moments of togetherness, despite the individualisation exacerbated by new technologies. Television, most notably, shapes a cultural space of commonality and shared experience/conversation for diasporic families and communication across the generations. This is often valued by parents as a means of socialising children into their family's religious, political, moral and cultural values.**

Research shows a range of functions performed by media in household and familial spaces, including provision of a common focus for leisure and conversation, provision of symbolic resources for family myths and narratives, the regulation of family time and space and a means of separating or connecting family subsystems within and beyond the home. However, a tension is evident between two trends:

On the one hand, media experience still tends to be shared with other family members, with many relying on media to generate and reinforce communal experiences, values and discussion. On the other hand, media are becoming more personalised, used in private spaces, with the rise of a media-rich bedroom culture for children, mobile phones enabling more personal communication and the diversification of media goods and services supporting individualised taste cultures and lifestyles within the family.

The longer trend, however, is not that of collectivity around the media (especially, television) but rather of individualisation within the home as well as within communities. This trend is stimulated in part by the availability of ever-cheaper and more personalised versions of once-communal goods. This has particular benefits for certain groups: the telephone has particular significance for young and older people, television for those who are house-bound and the telephone at work for single parents and parents returning to work.

For children and young people, an important contribution of research – whether based on observations of young people hanging out on the street corner or, more recently, going online in their bedroom, has been to challenge the moral panics that commonly associate youthful media use with fears regarding their vulnerability and victimisation or, on the other hand, their engagement with varieties of mediated 'hoolliganism'.

Children's media pleasures vary across Europe<sup>18</sup>: a 'screen entertainment culture' is particularly strong in the UK, with Denmark following close. Households in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands are 'pioneers' of new technologies, including for children. Spain maintains a strongly family-oriented culture where children spend less time watching television alone in their bedroom.

Parental education and income also have a part to play, though their effects may be opposed. It is not simply the more affluent who have more. Rather, those in lower-income households are more likely to have a television or games machine in their bedroom, while highly educated parents are more likely to provide them with books and a computer at home, often in their bedrooms.

Further, two-parent households (and households with working mothers) are more likely to provide a media-rich home, reflecting their higher incomes, yet single parents are just as likely to provide media-rich bedrooms for their children, suggesting considerable efforts made to provide for children in single-parent families. Further, networked technologies provide new and significant means for families dispersed across households, sometimes across considerable distances, to maintain contact.

**In short, for parents, media pose considerable challenges regarding values, competences and authority. But they also bring considerable advantages in terms of leisure, shared interests and pleasures. Different families, in different cultures, are making rather different decisions about how, therefore, to fit media into their homes and lifestyles.**

Television, most notably, shapes a cultural space of commonality and shared experience/conversation for diasporic families and communication across the generations





## 4. New challenges for parenting

**Despite the clichéd image of the lone child in front of the computer, most children experience media as part of a social interaction or setting. So parenting still matters. Research has long examined the role of parents in relation to their children's media use, typically distinguishing different relationships:**

- co-use – the parent is present, even sharing the activity with the child
- active mediation – the parent talks about content (eg, interpreting, critiquing) to guide the child
- restrictive mediation – the parent sets rules that restrict the child's use (eg, by time or activities)
- monitoring – the parent checks available records of the child's media use afterwards
- technical restrictions – use of software to filter, restrict or monitor the child's use.<sup>19</sup>

The EU Kids Online survey asked children about all these types of mediation as practised by parents and also by teachers and peers. Some findings from the survey are summarised below:

Overall, it seems that there is a fair amount of general positive mediation taking place. None of the gender differences are huge, but usually there is slightly more intervention in the case of girls. As might be expected, there is considerably more active mediation of younger children's experience of the internet.

But parents and children have different perspectives on how much 'regulation' happens. Roughly speaking a quarter of parents and children disagree about whether these different forms of mediation are taking place (or looked at another way, in the vast majority of cases they agree).

The vast majority of parents are still pursuing some form of active mediation even in the case of older teenagers. There is some, but little, gender difference, but notably more active mediation the higher the educational attainment level.

The clearly most distinct area where there are rules is giving out personal information (85%). The second is for rules relates to uploading material (64%), but this might well reflect rules specifically if the photos and videos are of the children themselves. The next most common rules concern downloading (57%), relating to the wider discussions about copyright issues and illegal downloads.

There is particular disagreement between parents and children over the issue of whether parents monitored which websites the children visited – less than half agreed. 15% of parents said they monitored websites, whereas their children said they did not.

But more striking is the fact that substantially more children say this monitoring is taking place when the parents deny it (38%).

One reason parents should take more responsibility for children's internet use especially is that, although only a minority of children encounters risks online parents significantly underestimate this: 41% of parents whose child has seen sexual images online say that their child has not seen this; 56% of parents whose child has received nasty or hurtful messages online say that their child has not; 52% of parents whose child has received sexual messages say that their child has not; 61% of parents whose child has met offline with an online contact say that their child has not.<sup>1</sup>

**There is clearly a considerable amount of parental mediation of different kinds being practised in European families. In a cross-sectional survey, it is not possible to determine whether this mediation reduces the risk of harm to children online. Indeed, it is possible that parents act as they do precisely because something has already bothered or upset their child.**

## 5. New methods of learning, new knowledge gaps

**Education systems across Europe, from school through to university, are increasingly reliant on technology-enhanced classrooms. In parallel, informal and lifelong learning are also expanding as e-learning resources and technologies become widespread. This extends learning opportunities for all, particularly those marginalised by special educational needs, disability, ethnicity and so on. But it also affords increased privatisation of learning resources/spaces via edutainment, learning software and a growing educational market.**

Greater internet use is associated with higher levels of education, so educational achievement may be expected to increase the extent and sophistication of internet use. However, gaps in ICT provision and insufficient/outdated provision of ICT in schools should be addressed, and media education should be resourced as a core element of school curricula and infrastructure.

The Euridyce Report from 2001<sup>20</sup> charts the expansion of European actions in the use of ICT in educational systems, revealing a range of initiatives undertaken at the EU level to integrate ICT into education. National policy analysis for the report revealed four levels of policy action across Europe: (a) actions to enhance facilities and equipment (hardware and software); (b) teacher training initiatives; (c) the inclusion of ICT in courses; (d) specific supporting initiatives.

Does this benefit learning? European Schoolnet reported in 2006<sup>21</sup> that:

- ICT has most impact in primary schools in the home language (that is, English in the studies) and science. The implication is therefore that funding and efforts are most profitably directed in this direction.
- The evidence for mathematics is less compelling than for English and science, but longer use of ICT by young people is linked to improved mathematics scores.
- A clear finding is that teachers' practice does not change as much as expected when ICT is introduced into the classroom. Moreover, there is a growing gap between high and low e-confident teachers and schools.

- Many of the findings relate to the UK and to England in particular, and there are gaps in what is known about other countries.
- The review shows that current education systems hinder more than support ICT impact.

The potential of ICT for in/formal learning is also the subject of academic attention. The visual mode of learning is becoming more widespread than verbal modes of learning and representation. Countering the tendency merely to use ICT to deliver traditional curricula more efficiently, many researchers are suggesting alternative ways to consider the use of ICT in formal settings.

In reviewing evidence for the benefits of ICT in learning, Livingstone (2009)<sup>22</sup> observes that, 'national policies for enhancing informal learning "anywhere, anytime", supporting "the home-school link", and building "a whole school community" depend, crucially, on the active participation of individual parents.

Two hurdles exist: one is attitudinal, for parents must share this educational and technological vision for their child; the other is material, for parents must possess the resources (time, space, knowledge and money) to implement this vision'.

**In summary, it seems not yet proven that the use of ICT in education does indeed bring greater benefits to children than their being educated without it. There is a lack of clarity over whether ICT is to be used for delivering pre-designed curriculums or for alternative student-centred learning model. Under some circumstances, some uses produce positive outcomes. Last, albeit only for a small minority, there are indications of genuinely new learning opportunities.**

### Girl cultures

Girl cultures emerge, online, as girls engage in cultural consumption and production activities. Identities are negotiated and constructed, sexualities explored, peer networks strengthened and new ties formed. Two UK studies found that for some, the media play the role of cultural resources from which they draw elements to think about themselves with and to talk with (Buckingham and Bragg, 2003; Nayak and Kehily, 2008). Girls who mature earlier than their peers may use the media as a 'super peer' to learn about sexual information that is otherwise not discussed in peer groups (Brown et al, 2005). An analysis of the website Beimgirl.com showed that despite the commercial website's intention to provide a space dedicated to girls for exploration of puberty information and products, much of the information provided is commercially laden, and girls are not given an active role in the creation of content (Mazzarella, 2008).

## 6. New relations of in/dependence?



Health, ageing support and other care and support services are increasingly reliant on the spread of networked and domestic technologies

Health, ageing support and other care and support services are increasingly reliant on the spread of networked and domestic technologies. This has implications for the care of elderly, disabled and rural populations, supporting independence/self-sufficiency and affording flexibility in systems of care in the home and by the extended family. As was the case for e-learning, the benefits for individuals, families and communities must be balanced against the evident rise in a privatised market for health advice, services and support that contrasts with traditional top-down state-managed models and that may exacerbate inequalities and exclusion.

Integrated policies for supporting healthy ageing are now an EU-wide priority. An important part of this agenda is to incorporate ICT into policies designed to

assist healthy ageing, reducing pressures on both families and the state.

However, 'active ageing' remains a confusing concept for many across Europe and progress seems to be hindered not only by fragmented policies and responsibilities but also by disparities in implementation (for instance, the socioeconomic and demographic differences between other parts of Europe and some of the post-Communist new member states).

Can initiatives for eHealth, tele-health services and smart home technologies aid older people to live within their own homes while receiving adequate support? While the health dimensions of this question are apparent, there is also a related social dimension. On the one hand, these initiatives, often heavily ICT-reliant, may enable people to live independently as far as is possible and on the other, they assist the activities of informal and family carers who now need to accommodate care activities as part of their ongoing professional lives.<sup>23</sup>

**Much, however, needs to be done. An EC document on an overview of the European strategy in ICT for ageing well (2009: 4) points out that 'the majority of older people do not yet enjoy the benefits of the digital age – low cost communications and online services that could support some of their real needs – since only 15% use the internet. Severe vision, hearing or dexterity problems, frustrate many older peoples' efforts (21% of the over 50s) to engage in the information society. The market of ICT for ageing well is still in a nascent phase and does not yet fully ensure the availability and takeup of the necessary ICT enabled solutions.'**

## 7. New literacies

**As many sectors of society (from work, education, welfare, civic participation, entertainment etc) incorporate digital platforms and connectivity into their core activities, new skills and literacies become important. Some traditionally valued skills are sidelined (eg, using libraries, referring to manuals, accessing authorities) while new skills become prominent (eg, just in time learning, accessing diverse online sources, networking and peer collaboration). Crucially, networked digital media are not only the means of accessing information but also of producing it: consider the rise of user-generated content and digital participation.**

Convergence and diversification in media and communication technologies and services opens up new opportunities for individuals, even new routes to empowerment. Moreover, the accompanying shift in regulatory regimes towards co- and, especially, self-regulation exposes individuals to new risks. No longer is great emphasis placed on the actions of supposedly benevolent state authorities in determining, on the one hand, what is 'good' for people and, on the other, what they should be protected from. In an age of individualisation and consumer choice, these decisions are, increasingly, devolved to the individual.

In Europe, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive requires that all EC member states report on population levels of media literacy at three yearly intervals. The task of producing criteria by which media literacy can be measured is now underway. Internationally, other initiatives are also underway – see, for example, the work of the Dynamic Coalition on Media Education of the Internet Governance Forum. Ambitiously, yet plausibly in a society that is increasingly dependent on media and information technologies across diverse spheres of society, media literacy can be said to serve three key purposes:

- Democracy, participation and active citizenship
- The knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice
- Lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment

A 2005 review<sup>24</sup> of the literature on adults' media literacy levels for Ofcom followed the regulator's general division of access, understanding and creation, with some expansion of the terms. The report concluded that key barriers to media literacy include age, SES (including education and income factors), gender, disability, ethnicity and proficiency in English.

Key enablers include the design of technologies and contents, adult education opportunities, consumer information and awareness, perceived value of media goods and services, self-efficacy (skills and confidence in using new media technologies), social networks to offer support in gaining and maintaining access, family composition (in particular, having children in the household), work involving the use of computers and new technologies and the activities of institutional stakeholders.

A parallel review on children's media literacy<sup>25</sup> reveals the following:

- 'In terms of access, the literature suggests that children and young people already possess quite high levels of functional literacy – that is, the skills and competencies needed to gain access to media content, using the available technologies and associated software'.
- 'In terms of understanding, literature suggests that children's awareness of areas such as television 'language', the difference between representation and reality, and the persuasive role of advertising, develops both as a function of their increasing knowledge of the world, and as a result of their broader cognitive and social development'.

- 'When it comes to creativity, research here suggests that there is considerable potential for media to be used as means of communication and self-expression, not least by socially disadvantaged groups'.

**Among social science researchers, and as advocated by media critics, media activists and consumer groups, media literacy recognises the growing importance of media, information and communications in society. Although attention is often focused on children and the provision of media education in schools, media literacy is also vital for families and the general public.**

Convergence and diversification in media and communication technologies and services opens up new opportunities for individuals, even new routes to empowerment





## 8. Digital citizenship?

**Much like the promises and problems latent in the use of ICT for education, use of ICT for civic participation remains a contested territory, especially when it is hoped by these means to overcome supposed youthful apathy and alienation.**

In reviewing the evidence on the relationship between new media technologies and the civic participation and engagement of young people, Livingstone (2009: 146) brings together findings from a range of international projects, focusing ‘on the civic interests and potential of the majority of children and young people, rather than focusing on the notable, often exciting exceptions – instigators of new social movements and the like – that attract popular acclaim or notoriety’. She argues that, ‘in so far as participation is or could be mediated by the internet, both providers and users – politicians, youth organisations, citizens – face a series of conceptual, technical, political and communicative challenges’.

Participation depends on the social location of individuals within specific contexts. The UK Children Go Online<sup>26</sup> project found that:

- **Producing as well as receiving content:** 44% of 9- to 19-year-old weekly users have completed a quiz online, 25% have sent an email or text message to a website, 22% have voted for something online and 17% have sent pictures or stories to a website.
- **Some are interested in civic issues:** 54% of 12-to 19-year-olds who use the internet at least weekly have sought out sites concerned with political or civic issues.

- **Age, gender and social grade make a difference:** girls, older and middle-class teens visit a broader range of civic and political sites.

This report revealed three distinct groupings of young people in relation to civic participation online:

- **The interactors:** these young people engage the most interactively with websites, and although they are not especially likely to visit civic websites, they are the most likely to make their own web pages.
- **The civic-minded:** these young people are not especially likely to interact with websites generally, nor are they especially likely to make their own web pages. Rather, they are distinctive for being much more likely to visit a range of types of civic websites, most of all charity websites and sites concerned with human rights issues.
- **The disengaged:** these young people are the least active in all three areas of online participation, being much less likely than the other two groups to interact with sites, visit civic sites or make their own web page.

The European project CivicWeb<sup>27</sup> (2008) focused on young people between the ages of 15 and 25 and their civic engagement, using qualitative methods. There are considerable differences across Europe – Hungary shows civic participation and engagement is scarce across the population; Dutch findings highlight young people’s opinions on the purpose of blogging.

The EUYOUNG<sup>28</sup> project in its final comparative report, concluded that there is a clear-cut differentiation among countries for what concerns both the use of the media for political information and the relationships which exist between media use and other variables related to political participation.

While many declare the potential of the internet to engage young people towards civic and democratic participation, and while many also lament the disappearance of political engagement and civic interests among young people, the situation in reality appears more complex as the potential of the internet to make a difference is being debated. The internet affords many new opportunities for revitalising engagement and creating new forms of social activism. It lowers barriers to connectivity. However, it is too early to tell whether it is generally replicating previous patterns of actual participation.

**Most digital citizenship initiatives have proved more successful in offering new routes to engagement for those who are already engaged citizens; few, thus far, have managed to draw in the disengaged in any significant or new ways.**

## Where next?

**In this report we have highlighted a set of themes that stress continuities as well as change. This is not a summary. Instead, we recap some of our core trends and ideas and identify what we believe are the priorities for the future agenda.**

- There is a shift away from media effects and moral panic towards understanding the ways in which the media shapes identity, how everyday lives are mediated.
- Households need to be seen as the site of reproduction of differences in ICT use – by age and various other axes of differences.
- Media consumption is individualised but also the site of sharing as well as disagreements and arguments – the tension between individualisation and togetherness.
- There needs to be a focus on the continuity across moments of mediation – the ways in which parental concerns, talk, discourse and so forth remain strikingly similar sometimes for old as well as new media.
- It is important that the media are seen as not simply good or bad, but rather as an infrastructure, or a resource, with significant implications for all that they mediate.
- Youth cultures are emergent – sometimes strongly globalised, sometimes heavily localised.
- The media are increasingly important in sustaining and shaping ethnic identities and transnational links.

### The media as infrastructure

- Almost every dimension of family life – eg, relationships, identities, health, education, values, work-life balance – is dependent in some way on media and information technologies.
- These bring opportunities and risks, and they demand new critical and digital skills, as well as new regulatory structures.
- More research is needed on how media contents (on ‘old’ and ‘new’ platforms) support or undermine family life, childhood and identities. This should be available to guide parents.

### The media as content

More research is needed on how media contents (on ‘old’ and ‘new’ platforms) support or undermine family life, childhood and identities, and this should be available to guide parents – recognising a huge information need among parents (the ‘sandwich generation’).

### The media as tool

Diverse media platforms can be and are being used as a tool to reach families and provide information, guidance and advice on diverse issues. What is needed is evaluation research to identify which approaches (messages, platforms, contexts) are effective.

### Conclusion

**Clearly, these next steps call for a new research agenda that will clarify ambiguities and balance debates. With this report, we hope to have opened up some key questions on risks and harm, opportunities and risks, celebration and guarded optimism. In what follows, we summarise some of our findings by key social axes, drawing on the full review of empirical research available in the main report.**

## Social and digital exclusion

ICT such as the internet and mobile phones are first and foremost about communication and social interaction, both important for a healthy family life. Exclusion from opportunities for learning about ICT and interaction with them at home can therefore mean exclusion from support networks and wider society for those who do not have access or skills to use the communication tools available.

The most recent research shows that the economic and educational resources of the family are replicated in digital environments. To create societies in which all families are equal, it is important to understand how we can break this vicious cycle for disadvantaged families so that access to services, social relationships, education and information is not dependent on cultural, social or economic background.

# Differences within and across families

The role of the media in everyday life is shaped by age, gender, social class and cultural differences. Some divides seem to be closing, some getting exacerbated and some new ones emerging.

## Age

- Young people have increasingly media-rich lives and bedrooms. Indeed, research attention is increasingly focused on the media practices, literacies, risks and opportunities of the 'digital' youth.
- Media use differs by age. During primary school years children are generally not major media users, although television and electronic games are highly popular. Children younger than about nine years old are relatively uninterested in bedroom culture but as they grow older it becomes a crucial part of their experimentation with and expression of both identity and privacy.
- During the teenage years, young people begin to broaden their range of media uses and tastes, often seeking to individuate themselves from their friends while, simultaneously, being absorbed in the (often normative, even coercive) culture of their peer group. By their late teens and early twenties, young people are negotiating a wide range of information, communication and literacy demands as they manage the transition from school to further study and/or work.

- Reviews of both adult and children's media literacy reveal that people possess highly variable levels of functional, creative and critical literacy. In relation to the internet, children progress 'up the ladder' as they get older – most activities online become more common with age as it seems that children's internet-related skills increase with age. It is likely that adults trace a similar path as they gain online expertise.
- As an adult, a person's position in the life stage continues to influence their expectations from the media. The telephone gains new significance for the young elderly, while 'old' media continue to be significant dependent on their stage in the life cycle and place in the family. ICT technologies and eHealth policy is almost entirely focused on healthy ageing and older people.

## Gender

- Interpersonal relations in the family are gendered and mediated. There are differences within families in the symbolic significance attributed to fathers and mothers within children's perceptions of technical competences of their parents.
- The media as an object in the home has gendered uses. In the 1990s, the findings from the teleworking studies by Haddon and Silverstone

had revealed that it was almost always women who took up teleworking and that most of these women had a commitment first and foremost to their domestic role, and then to find work that fitted in. with their home life.

- Johnsson-Smaragdi et al (1998)<sup>29</sup> note gender differences in Flanders, Germany and Sweden: while all children incorporate new media into their everyday media menu, boys are more likely to have a television set and VCR in their rooms than girls.
- Further, the physical space reserved for the media in the home is gendered. For example, Livingstone's (2002)<sup>30</sup> found that families with sons place computers in bedrooms more often than those with daughters in a common space.
- The literature shows that the physical space reserved for the media in the home is gendered. Note Livingstone's (2002) <sup>31</sup>findings that families with sons place computers in bedrooms more often than those with daughters in a common space.
- There is a small difference in internet use between boys and girls in the younger age groups and gender gaps in access to the internet are mostly small and are closing in nearly all countries.

- There are also gender differences in children's experience of online opportunities and risks (as a function of use preferences).
- Boys are apparently more likely to encounter (or create) conduct risks and girls are more affected by content and contact risks.
- When it comes to the amount of time spent online, there is a lack of comparable data to make similar analysis.
- Boys appear more likely to seek out offensive or violent content.
- It seems likely that these gender differences are the (mainly) unintended consequences of the choices that girls and boys make regarding preferred online activities.
- The exploration of body and sexuality sometimes crosses the boundary and becomes risky when teens have a poor understanding of its consequences.
- Girls who mature earlier than peers may use the media as a 'super peer' to learn about sexual information.
- While little is still known, it seems that age, gender and social grade make a difference in civic participation. Livingstone and Bober's findings (2005) revealed that girls, older and middle-class teens visit a broader range of civic and political sites.
- Productive media technologies offer opportunities for the development of (feminine) identity and may empower girls with the means to 'speak up' and disrupt hetero-normative ideals.

## Social class

- On a country level, there is a positive correlation between the percentage of broadband subscribers in a country and the Gini coefficient.
- Household inequalities in SES have consequences for risks as well as opportunities, with classic patterns of exclusion mirrored in engagement with ICT.
- Two-parent households are much more likely to provide a media-rich home, reflecting their considerably higher incomes; single parents are just as likely to provide media-rich bedrooms for their children.

- Class differences remain significant in the nature of participation online. Boys, middle-class children and older teenagers are more likely than girls, working-class children and younger teenagers to engage in online communication, information seeking and peer-to-peer connection.
- There are widespread policy efforts to overcome social exclusion by means of encouraging digital inclusion.
- Livingstone et al, in their review of adult media literacy (2005), found that the barriers to access are demographic in other words, largely a matter of socioeconomic status.
- Buckingham (2005) noted that social class and economics status are among the interrelated barriers to media literacy.

## Cultural differences

- Ethnic differences link importantly with media consumption; 57% of non-European ethnic migrants have internet access at home (41% of non-immigrants; see Eurobarometer 66.2, 2006); 85% of immigrants from outside Europe have a mobile phone (78% of non-immigrants; see Eurobarometer, 2006).
- There is evidence that access to ICT leads to solidifying within group bonds (within the family or minority community) but not necessarily to increased connections with those in other groups.
- The literature points to significant differences across European cultures in parenting styles, media consumption and other practices.

- Media strategies vary with socialisation cultures. Kirwil (2009)<sup>32</sup> noted that the effectiveness of time restriction in European countries shows that the significance of the strategy differs with the socialisation cultures of the countries.
- The context of family viewing is a crucial determining factor in what causes offence.
- The gendered control of the remote control, for example, is an element of the discussion of diasporic media consumption.
- Television consumption shapes a cultural space of commonality for diasporic families and cross-generational communication.
- Diasporic media consumption is diverse. Individual family members consume diasporic media in the banal ways they consume any other media, making their choices based on preferences and interests, not based on essentialist identities and pre-given commitments to a specific (national) community.

## Young people have increasingly media-rich lives and bedrooms.

Indeed, research attention is increasingly focused on the media practices, literacies, risks and opportunities of the 'digital' youth

## Diasporic families and media consumption

Research on diasporic media consumption reveals intergenerational tensions in the use of the media, especially television. At the same time, it shows that significant elements of everyday family bonding and communication take place around shared television viewing. Young diasporic people's media consumption tends to be diverse and cosmopolitan, as it often includes media of various cultural and linguistic zones, as well as shared and individual use of media and communication technologies. Long distance relations sustained between parents and children separated through the experience of migration represent a distinct communication experience for transnational families. Parnas (2005) discusses the intense exchange of text messages and phone calls between migrant mothers and their children, while Madianou (2006) writes about uses of the internet and mobile phones among separated families in order primarily to sustain relations, more than for the purpose of sustaining ethnic identities. Diasporic families often appear critical towards mainstream national and transnational media.



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# Endnotes

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<sup>4</sup> These trends are selected from the summaries of the Existential Field reports produced by the Family Platform consortium. Full reports are available for download from [www.familyplatform.eu](http://www.familyplatform.eu)

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