

## [Sonia Livingstone](#) and Kirsten Drotner Children's media cultures in comparative perspective

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Sonia Livingstone is author or editor of a dozen books and 100+ academic articles and chapters on media audiences, children and the internet, domestic contexts of media use and media literacy. Recent books include *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (edited, with Moira Bovill, Erlbaum, 2001), *Young People and New Media* (Sage, 2002), *Audiences and Publics* (2005), *The Handbook of New Media* (edited, with Leah Lievrouw, Sage, 2006), *Public Connection?* (with Nick Couldry and Tim Markham, Palgrave, 2007) and *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (with Kirsten Drotner, Sage, 2008). She was President of the International Communication Association 2007-8.

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## Children's media cultures in comparative perspective

### Introduction

Children's agency, their social engagements and participation are catalyzed by the combined developments of global communication networks and digital media technologies, thereby catapulting children's media cultures to the centre of public attention and shaping children's everyday lives and the conception of childhood in many parts of the world. Debates are rife over the regulation of children's media fare, for this is increasingly more personalised, more globalised and certainly more volatile and versatile than, for example, the more familiar print media have been. Arguably, globalising media processes favour new forms of cosmopolitanism by providing opportunities for children to encounter and engage with greater cultural and social diversity or, at least, to know that such possibilities exist. On the other hand, it appears that the commercial basis of these media downplays such diversities in order to cater to mass audiences across spatial boundaries.

Yet, while audience researchers have long analysed children's media culture, too often they have asked disconnected questions about the impacts of particular media on particular groups of children, often framed in terms of moral panics, and with a predominant focus on American children as the implicit prototype for children everywhere. This chapter offers a new framework for understanding child audiences, grounded in the complex and changing cultural environments within which children live and contextualising specific research questions regarding media interpretations and appropriations within a broad account of children and young people's life worlds.

We argue that research must move beyond familiar discourses of celebration or concern and develop multi-disciplinary and multi-sited understandings of the complex relations among children, media and culture. Our *International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (2007) includes telling cases of children's media culture in 'other' parts of the world, supporting the argument that the dominant English language research tradition must now 'de-Westernise' (Curran and Park, 2000), recognising the importance of globalisation or transnationalism and prioritising comparative analysis in terms of method. Only thus can we counter universalistic (or even imperialistic) assumptions about 'childhood' or 'media' as homogenous phenomena.

More concretely, in what follows, our aim is to highlight the range of recent research on children's media engagement, conducted across all continents of the globe, thus revealing the cultural commonalities and diversities that characterise children's mediated cultures around the world. We conclude that children and young people play a key role in contemporary processes of mediatized globalization, with notable implications for relations between generations, for local and national cultures and for transnational media flows.

### From protectionism to empowerment

Historically, it has often been public moral or media panics that have catapulted children's media uses into the public eye, this providing the major motivation for conducting and, certainly, funding research on children and media over decades. As has long been the case (Drotner, 1992), questions of media harm become drawn into urgent debates over the regulation and governance of both media and childhood, with

the laudable desire to protect children from harm uneasily balanced against both adult freedom of expression and, less noticed but equally important, children's own rights to expression, exploration and, even, risk-taking (Millwood Hargrave and Livingstone, 2009). It is the pessimism inherent in these moral panics, uneasily combined with society's idealistic optimism regarding the new, which has long informed the dominant – and highly ambivalent - frameworks for researching children's media, especially within media and communication studies.

Yet critics of the uneasy historical connection between moral panics and administrative research on children's media (- we refer here to Lazarsfeld's, 1941, classic contrast between critical and administrative schools of communication research) have long observed that both the moral panics over potentially harmful media and the excitement over potentially empowering media are not really, or not simply, debates over media - debates over the cultural values that society should promulgate to its children (Rowland and Watkins, 1984; Critcher, 2008). These concern, in short, the potential and actual meaning-making processes of communication and social interaction, and the ways in which they shape the cultural dimension of life. A parallel debate in childhood studies, revitalised by Philippe Ariès' (1960) classic *Centuries of Childhood*, has centred on the historically, culturally and psychologically fraught relations between adults and children. For both academics and the wider public, children's cultural articulations, whether self-styled or mediated, are obvious entry points for playing out an array of concerns, because they are tangible manifestations of children's everyday practices and priorities. Given the increasing prominence of the media in children's everyday cultures, the social concerns over children often revolve around media as a symptom or pretext for discussion and debate. Indeed, publicly expressed concerns over children and media are often not, at heart, about media but rather they concern socio-cultural relations of authority and the negotiation of cultural and social boundaries (Drotner, 1999).

But analysis of the latter requires a multidisciplinary approach, and this is precisely what is excluded when paediatricians and clinical psychologists capture, to the near-exclusion of alternative perspectives, the public agenda on matters concerning children. Consider the widespread attention devoted to the American Academy of Pediatrics' (2001) claim that children should not be allowed to watch more than two hours of television per day irrespective of the substance of programmes or contexts of use. The result is often that little attention is paid to the more subtle and contextualised insights of educationalists, let alone sociologists, cultural theorists, media scholars and others with expertise in children's lifeworlds (e.g. Corsaro, 1997). However, in advocating the importance of these multidisciplinary approaches, we must also acknowledge the relative paucity of research on children's media cultures in many countries and within many disciplines, notwithstanding consistently high levels of public interest in children's media engagement. This is particularly problematic for the two primary fields on which the analysis of children and media draws, as already signalled above, namely media studies and childhood studies.

Traditionally, in media studies, economic structures, textual articulations and historical trajectories take centre stage, relegating children to the contextual margins of interest, a specialist topic of interest only to the few. Conversely in childhood studies, children (and youth) as social agents, psychological subjects or cultural producers are positioned as key areas of interest but here the media are accorded only

a minimal role, being defined as a narrow area of applied research rather than a substantive focus in its own right. So, although each approach has much to offer, research on children and media has suffered from this restricted vision (Livingstone, 1998). Partly, this problem arises because, implicit in the relative neglect of children's media cultures by both media studies and childhood studies is the assumption that these media cultures can be safely relegated to the domain of the private rather than the public, of leisure rather than work, of entertainment rather than 'serious' engagement with society. This assumption is no longer tenable – not that we would agree it ever was. Today, young people's uses of new communication technologies have far greater significance than their traditional relation to audiovisual technologies, all too easily marginalised as 'mere' entertainment, for – as has in fact always been the case for print media – they represent crucial new routes to education, civic participation, work and the wider world.

For example, when disadvantaged children in India with little or no schooling get the opportunity to take up computing, access the internet and enter game worlds, questions begin to be asked about these children's position in public life, the material and symbolic resources which grant them a voice and a new visibility, and the institutional consequences of such 'digital inclusion'. When highly profitable transborder flows of marketing and media products push the boundaries between local and global forms of representation, questions arise regarding children's identity development and sense of belonging to a community. And when, with the rise of the knowledge society (Mansell, 2004; Stehr, 1994) or network society (Castells, 1996), children's literacies assume a new urgency – should they be media literate, computer literate, multimedia literate, information literate or something completely different – new questions of convergent and critical literacies become ever more pressing in a complex media environment. The debate over children's media must therefore shift, belatedly but crucially, from a primarily protectionist to a primarily emancipatory or empowerment frame. Since children's media engagements are key to their present and future social engagements, the task is no longer to work out how to restrict or control children's media uses so as to minimise risks but, instead, to work out how best to enhance and guide children so as to maximise opportunities. This is not to say the risk of harm no longer exists, but rather that a protectionist approach must be balanced against, and understood only in relation to, the more important empowerment agenda.

In the remainder of this chapter, we argue that the importance of contextualising children's media culture within a multidimensional account of societal change cannot be overestimated, for only thus can we avoid the narrow and decontextualised impact analysis of technological determinism (Smith and Marx, 1994) in evaluating the social, cultural and personal consequences of media and information technologies. This means analysing children's media culture as it shapes and is shaped by the dimensions of space, time and social relations (as Thompson, 1995, does in his account of media and modernity, but as is so rarely extended to include children; although see Meyrowitz, 1984). It also means recognising that these dimensions are themselves culturally and historically contingent. So, rather than emphasizing the one-way impact of media on children, we urge the importance of asking when and why different children use different aspects of media, how these uses are shaped by family circumstances, educational expectations, economic pressures and cultural values and whether such media uses enable or impede children's opportunities in terms of knowledge, action or resources. To address these questions, it should by now be

obvious that we welcome contributions from a diversity of academic disciplines also – sociology, anthropology, literary studies, history, cultural studies, pedagogy and more. Only with this wider lens can a greater diversity of research come into view, opening up some exciting prospects for the field.

### **Everyday culture matters**

For many researchers, then, the investigation of the changing place of media in childhood is grounded in a specialist focus on children and childhood. For others, the analysis of media, communications and culture comes first, this being adapted and developed in relation to children and young people in particular. Notwithstanding the marginalisation of this intersection of fields already noted above, it is undoubtedly the case that both approaches are valuable, potentially combining to offer a rich understanding of the specificities of children's life contexts combined with more general perspectives from the analysis media, culture and society.

How shall we identify, analyse and understand children's media cultures around the world? The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz cogently defines culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973: 89). The "symbolic forms" noted by Geertz can be words, images, written text or numbers – that is, a range of semiotic sign repertoires; and this process of sense-making, or signification, is increasingly mediated by global media such as satellite television, the internet and mobile communication. This foregrounding of the cultural dimension is encapsulated by American Roland Robertson who argues that cultural globalization serves to accelerate everybody's notion of living in "a single place". Yet this accelerated interdependence also brings about confrontations among different, even clashing world views. So, globalization involves "comparative interaction of different forms of life" (Robertson 1992: 6, 27).

Detailed observational and ethnographic work readily reveals that, in their everyday lives, children and young people weave together practices involving a wide range of media and cultural forms and technologies, generating a rich symbolic tapestry in a manner which is in some ways deliberate or agentic but in other ways accidental, part of the sheer serendipity of childhood (Corsaro, 1997; Schröder, Drotner et al, 2003). But, since the relations among play and learning, toys and media are increasingly intersecting, being managed and marketed as part of the regulation and the commercialisation of children's culture, a critical perspective informed by a political economic analysis of children's media is vital. Only then can we judge how far children's culture is being transformed into promotional culture, as we examine ways in which modern marketing directs flows of popular culture, identity becomes refashioned through consumption and the citizen (or viewer) becomes transformed into the consumer (Kenway and Bullen, 2001).

Further, only a critical perspective can investigate the question of inequalities - the degree to which some children gain access to certain kinds of meanings and practices, along with certain kinds of opportunities or dangers, while others lack such opportunities, restricted by certain social arrangements of time, space and cultural norms and values, as well as personal preferences and lifestyles. For this, analysis of the micro-practices of childhood – what de Certeau (1984) called 'the tactics' of everyday life – must be complemented by an analysis of the structures of family,

school, community and society that encompass them in multiple circles of influence and constraint (Bronfenbrenner, 1980).

In short, our advocacy of a focus on children's everyday cultures does not imply, by any means, a licence to become primarily either descriptive or celebratory on the part of children or media. Rather, the more empirical research generates a body of new material detailing the specifics of children's engagement with media cultures around the world, the more an integrative and critical lens on the relations between specific cultural practices and the broader social analysis of processes of power becomes necessary. Cultural studies has proved successful here in grounding its analysis in particular cultural forms in particular contexts in order to reveal both the power relations embedded in those experiences, forms and contexts and to guide theoretical conclusions that transcend the particular (Buckingham, 2008; du Gay, 1997; Seiter, 2008). Other approaches also integrate the micro and macro of cultural and political economy approaches (e.g. Kenway and Bullen, 2001; Kraidy and Khalil, 2008; Wasko, 2008). As Buckingham argues, the 'cultural circuit' linking processes of the production and consumption of mediated meanings demands a multidimensional and multi-level analysis that respects people's agency while recognising the significant degree to which institutions, culture and political economy shape the contexts within which people – including children - act. So, although the constraints of children's media provision are largely set institutionally, children's interpretations may reflexively reposition them as childish or patronising those texts considered appropriate for them by adults; one consequence is the emergence of children's tastes which, as Jenkins (2003) has shown, may then be re-appropriated by profit-hungry content providers.

This question of children's agency is gaining increasing interest especially in relation to new media, where they are seen not only as the creative reappropriators of imported or dominant media but additionally as the 'pioneers' in the new media world, popularly dubbed 'digital natives' by comparison with the 'digital immigrant' adults that seek, often ineffectively, to guide, teach or manage their relations with media (Prensky, 2001). Drotner (2000) proposes three key ways in which young people may specifically be said to be 'cultural pioneers' in their use of new media technologies, centring on innovation, interaction and integration. Under 'innovation', she notes how young people combine multiple media, multitask, blur production and reception and so make creative use of the opportunities available. By 'interaction', she points to how young people engage with each other within and through different media and media contents, opening up opportunities for intertextuality and connectivity. And by 'integration', she points to the transformation of the distinction between primary (or face-to-face) and secondary (mass mediated) socialisation, resulting in diverse and hybridised forms of mediated communication.

There is, it seems, an intriguing reverse generation gap opening up, in which children may become the leaders to their parent and teacher followers in relation to emerging mediated cultures. While not wishing to overstate the case – for children too have much to learn – their enhanced and much valued expertise in this regard challenges the traditional approach of media researchers towards their child subjects, forcing a reflexive reappraisal of just what adults, including researchers, may suppose they know 'better' than children, hastening some 'catching up' (e.g. checking out social networking services or other web 2.0 applications in advance of conducting

interviews with children) and – joining with other developments in the study of children and childhood, reframing research methodology from that of doing research ‘on’ to doing research ‘with’ children (Lobe et al, 2008).

Another instance of children’s potentially pioneering role in relation to the globalisation of media, one that illustrates Drotner’s analysis above, can be found in the exploration of diasporic peoples and media. Often, it is the media that move as part of transnational and global flows, while children stay where they have always been, in local settings defined largely by local traditions and cultures. However, following Appadurai’s ethnoscape, in addition to the (in this context) more obvious mediascape, the transborder flows of people also contribute to globalisation, and here it is ordinary families and communities whose activities shape their mediated culture, sometimes constructing diasporic media in new cultural contexts so as to retain a connection with their original ‘home’, or building mediated diasporic connections in the host culture, or by reappropriating the media of their new ‘home’ (Georgiou, 2001; Silverstone, 2005; Robins and Morley, 1989). The particular position of children – often quickest to find mediating strategies between original and host cultures, between generations and across linguistic and cultural contexts – in leading these transnational processes is only just beginning to be sufficiently recognised (Elias and Lemish, 2008).

Children’s agency in relation to media is not always publicly welcomed. On the contrary, often this is precisely what gives rise to adult concerns. Examples include contemporary conflicts with teachers and other adults of authority over time spent texting or gaming. These are in fact part of a long-term struggle over who has the right to control children’s leisure time and for what reasons (Seiter, 2008). Haddon and Ling note how the mobile operates as an ambivalent mediator between private and public spaces according to differing social arrangements. In some countries, such as Britain, perceived fears of public violence have served to domesticate and supervise children’s leisure time, and so the mobile offers both a parental “umbilical cord” and a lifeline to public space. In countries such as Finland and Japan, such fears are less pronounced and here the mobile helps structure and coordinate children’s public activities. The variations in negotiating children’s activities in public and private spaces are clear indications of the ambivalent ways in which media speak to, and impinge upon, particular tensions in changing definitions of childhood. To take another example, Hoover and Clark (2008) chart how, in the USA, parental articulation of normative values are forms of claims-making in terms of perceived cultural hierarchies and ideals of family life, articulations that are at odds with both their own and their children’s actual media practices as these could be followed through observation. Such insights help unpack prevalent notions of media discourses as monolithic givens and point to the need for more detailed studies and analytical sensitivity to contextual aspects, attuned to the often imperceptible, but significant, ambivalences involved in family negotiations over media.

Consumption is another key area in which cultural norms of child-adult relations are played out. In their chapter on child consumerism, Kenway and Bullen (2001) describe how advertising and entertainment aimed at children are currently converging, creating new ambivalences between parents and their offspring. In line with Kinder (1999), they note that commercial media and advertising industries position children as discrete, independent consumers with a “right” to make



independent choices, while at the same time cultivating adult hedonism with a "right" to have fun. As we hope to have made clear, a rigorous recognition of the importance and complexities of the everyday circumstances in which children engage with media provides good grounds for caution against taking normative public debates on media at face value, instead pointing to the necessity for contextualised empirical studies pursued across demarcations of discipline and region.

### **Difference and diversity in children's media cultures**

A central premise of this chapter is that difference and diversity is central to childhood. Understanding the importance of media and culture in the lives of children and young people therefore demands an engagement with theories of globalisation and transnational media flows, and with the methods of cross-national comparative and ethnographic research (Alasuutari, 1995; Morley and Robins, 1995; Rantanen, 2004; Tomlinson, 1999). Children and childhood and, further, processes of learning and development, family dynamics, peer relations, consumption, media engagement and play, are not the same everywhere. Nor, evidently, are the institutions, forms and practices associated with the media and communication environment. So, what is children's experience of media and culture in different countries? Are there commonalities across cultures? And what are the significant or intriguing points of divergence?

For many, the hotly contested theory of media imperialism remains a common starting point, if only to challenge this through empirical investigation. For example Strelitz and Boshoff (2008) observe that for South African youth, there is no unified national identity to be challenged, undermined or reshaped by imported media. In South Africa, class and ethnicity remain closely linked, marking major social divisions in – among other things – the interpretative resources with which young people interpret media contents. For example, a young black man reinterprets American rap music in terms of his turbulent experience in Soweto while middle class white students read techno music as offering an identity of 'global whiteness' which they prefer to a specifically African identity.

Strelitz and Boshoff suggest that youth's pleasurable engagement with imported media is often due to an intense negotiation with local contexts of experience, resulting in both a re-imagining of life's possibilities and also, simultaneously, a reaffirmation of the traditional. So, although one group of black working class students in Grahamstown reject global media for lacking 'cultural proximity', instead preferring local drama as offering a 'haven' from the threat of the modern, others, positioned at the hybrid intersection of the global and local, use media to negotiate competing identities. Examples include the Indian students in South Africa who try to reconcile traditional family values with the pleasure of watching the American series, *Friends*, or, involving a different kind of cultural negotiation, Bollywood movies. Consider too the interpretative demands on South African youth as American television confronts them, sometimes for the first time, with images of successful middle class black people or of young women with the right to publicly voice their experiences.

To those on the margins of the Arctic North, the critique of globalisation as a cultural and economic threat to a traditional way of life receives sparse attention. Moreover, debates that resonate elsewhere – should children watch national or imported

television programmes, for example? – make little headway in a country such as Greenland where the costs of producing domestic content for a population of 57,000 are prohibitive, making imported content is the norm. Notwithstanding a centuries-long history of imperialism, for young people in Greenland the prospect of the globalisation of culture and lifestyle is welcomed as an exciting opening up to the world, even though, for the rest of the world, Greenland barely figures on the map. Rygaard's (2008) portrait of youth culture in Greenland reveals that, as so often, it is youth who lead the way, particularly grasping the global connections afforded by the internet. She concludes that, although globalisation carries distinct risks for so small a population, this is far outweighed by the frustrations of being located within so marginal a context.

While youth 'lead the way' in cultural globalisation, the media and culture provided by a nation for its children often focus contestation over social values, especially when the society is itself under pressure to change. The values embedded in children's media culture Heller (2008) terms the 'hidden curriculum'. She shows how childhood games are shown to reinforce social roles, societal hierarchies and the importance of winning, whether they prioritise inventiveness and intellectual mastery, memory and knowledge, warfare and opposition or even, as in Snakes and Ladders, the very course of human life with its path of trials and successes, accompanied by good and evil. Individual economic competition – epitomised by Monopoly – posed a particular problem for socialist Hungary when first marketed in the 1960s and the refashioning of the game (with the board divided into 'good' socialist institutions of pedagogy, culture and trade unions and the 'bad' places of bars, tobacconists and pubs) captures the tacit recognition that children's play matters. Youthful resistance to such ideology is equally well demonstrated by the case of Monopoly, for Heller notes the secret and pleasurable circulation of the original Capitalist version among Hungarian households.

Control over media, culture and, of course, education by the State shapes children's experiences in many parts of the world. Donald (2008) traces the Chinese state's efforts to socialise children through education and media to fulfil a vision of a new and sustainable modernity, for example, through the insistence on broadcasting children's programmes in Mandarin despite the plethora of languages and dialects spoken at home. Rejecting the othering of Asia implied by the dominance of Western approaches in the (English-language) research literature, Donald examines children and media in the Asia Pacific region through the idea of 'regional modernity', seeking to understand the negotiation between local and global through its contextualisation in the geography, culture and politics of the region. This brings into focus some of the tensions in Asia's modernity that fit poorly with a Western modernity centred on individualism, secularism, freedom of speech and equality and allows us to avoid what Donald terms 'the lure of ungrounded cosmopolitanism'. Revealing a strongly anti-modern tendency in China, Australia and elsewhere, Donald is concerned to show that Asian modernity is characterised significantly by stark and growing differences in social class, typically mapped onto the crucial geographic distinction between urban and rural and thus dividing the experiences and life chances of children across the region.

Responding to rapid change in India is equally demanding, as Nayar and Bhide (2008) note when scoping children and young people's relation to the media in a country in

which they represent some half of the population. The potent combination of youthfulness, social change and new media developments has several consequences in India – one is ‘the politics of anxiety’, in Salman Rushdie’s phrase, another is the generational divide between parents and their children in terms of their experiences of media in childhood (see Kraidy and Khalil, 2008). Like other researchers cited here, Nayar and Bhide trace the connection between geography and consumption, contextualising consumption, lifestyle and youth culture in relation to both world geography and also the spaces of the nation, especially the urban/rural divide so striking in Asia. Too often, they argue, the world’s image of Indian youth – as fast-changing, successfully integrating Western and traditional values, ready to adapt to global capitalism, wired via the Internet cafés – is an urban image, barely touching the daily experience of millions of rural youth, though their aspirations may be very similar. It is also, to a considerable degree, a masculine one in India (and, arguably, elsewhere), though the signs of a new image of technologically skilled Indian womanhood can also be discerned in the emerging discourse of mediated modernity. This demands some clever footwork from young women (and their families), for as Nayar and Bhide observe, they remain the bearers of traditional values but added to this is today’s expectation of achievements commensurate with a globalised and commercialised individualism. This is exemplified by Indian Idol, a popular televised singing competition which is a far cry from the call for a Spartan lifestyle expected of youth by Nehru’s Government half a century ago.

Similar demands fall on the shoulders of Arab youth, although as elsewhere, the opportunities offered by new media technologies are enthusiastically welcomed by these young people, as they seek to participate in global youth culture. Kraidy and Khalil argue that the consequence is less cultural homogenization but rather a cultural hybridity, albeit one marked by the growing ‘detraditionalisation’ or individualism of family life (especially insofar as global influences are locally appropriated by Islamic culture – examples include the growth of religious channels on satellite television and the emergence of religious stars or *tele-muftis*). Such a hybridisation is hampered, however, by the paucity of indigenous cultural production for children in many Arab states, making reliance on Western imagery and ideas a practical necessity. Kraidy and Khalil trace how one Lebanese programme, *Mini Studio*, pioneered a multilingual cultural space for children but combined this with an equally pioneering approach to encouraging the advertising industry to target children – leading to the programme being popularly dubbed ‘Mini Market’. They are more optimistic about Al-Jazeera Children’s Channel and its promise to counter the relentless commercialisation of children’s culture by harnessing the interactive potential of the media to educate, engage and empower children.

What is meant here by ‘global youth culture’? Giddens (1991) argues that young people are, in globalised late modernity, fundamentally absorbed in ‘the project of the self’, a continual biographisation of identity for which today’s complex, intertextual and reflexive media environment provides the symbolic resources for the never-completed task of drafting and redrafting. Acknowledging Buckingham’s insistence on the recognition of structure, especially political economic and institutional constraints, as well as on the dynamics of the creative re-appropriations of given meanings, Wildermuth (2008) integrates audience reception analysis of interpretative practices with a notion of the mediated imagination in his rich, ethnographic account of youth’s creative appropriation of media resources in Brazil in order to ‘draft’ and

redraft the self. Again, this is a far from comfortable account for Brazilian youth suffer the contradictory demands of a ‘periphery country’, expected to ‘progress’ rapidly, especially via new media technologies, while still caught in the familiar trap of inequality, poverty and a considerable underclass. As ever, these tensions are made visible through the stratified acquisition and display of media goods and in the far greater choices available to middle class youth whose possessions and media activities thereby mark – and perpetuate - social distinction. As Wildermuth concludes, these inequalities are all but impossible to escape from, despite the deployment of media by underprivileged young people to seek individual tactics for identity, resistance and social mobility.

What immediately stand out when surveying these studies are the differences found in children's media cultures around the globe. As we argue, media scholars need to acknowledge these differences and act on them in analytical terms. Additionally, we also need to look beyond the richness and diversities in these cultures in order to seek for possible commonalities. In doing so, we may begin to detect economic, legal and social inequalities of power between adults and children, structuring generational interactions in most parts of the world. Perhaps these inequalities also help explain the pervasive public concerns over children's media engagements, since in relation to media especially, young users may exercise some form of independence. Also common across many cultures is the importance of gender in orchestrating genre preferences to a degree that class, ethnicity and age, arguably, do not (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). The often complicated pull and push between differences and commonalities in children's media cultures raises urgent questions about more global approaches to research.

### **The emerging research agenda**

What, then, of future directions for research? In the *International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture*, we mapped out some fruitful paths ahead. We began with Ito's account of the emerging lineaments of the interactive, participatory digital environment, apparently so welcoming to today's youth though often less so for today's researchers. Blurring the online/offline, mediated/face-to-face boundaries on which the analysis of media and communication has traditionally relied, the contemporary conceptual toolkit centres on the prefix, ‘re-’ – as in, remixing, reconfiguring, remediating, reappropriating, recombining (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Dutton and Shepherd, 2004; Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006). The familiar and the new are thus integrated, innovation being both continuous with and distinct from that which has gone before, simultaneously remediating the familiar with a shake of the kaleidoscope. The result is a convergent media culture – epitomised by the Japanese phenomena of Pokemon, Yugioh and Hamtaro – and broadly characterised by personalization, hypersociality, networking and ubiquity. This offers new ‘genres of participation’, engaging the collective imagination, indeed positively requiring creativity on the part of its typically youthful users, and raising many questions in the process (Jenkins, 2006).

The implications of such an engagement for people's life chances have yet to be traced. Takahashi (2008) looks beyond Japanese media to the anthropological analysis of Japanese society and its modernity. A de-westernised media studies cannot simply reject western theory, asserting the uniqueness of Japan (or anywhere else). Rather, she argues, it should identify concepts from diverse intellectual traditions and

consider, question and apply them in particular contexts, thereby enriching the conceptual toolkit for the analysis of society as well as for new media. For example, the public/private distinction central to western thinking provokes questions about visibility, sharedness and the public sphere. In Japan, a key distinction is that between *uchi* – an intimate interpersonal realm (e.g. within couples, friendships, work place camaraderie), now extended by the advent of peer-to-peer networking, and *soto* – a notion of ‘outside’ closely aligned with ‘them’ and so distinct from the western ‘public sphere’. Learning from the concepts and frameworks developed within the academy, and the society, of different countries poses an as yet little reflected upon challenge for many of us, for though we are willing to consider empirical findings internationally, we remain implicitly reliant on familiar theories and concepts with which to analyse them.

Literacy is just such a concept, commonly used in the English-speaking world, that only imperfectly matches concepts from other linguistic traditions (Livingstone, 2008). Understood in a context of empowerment and human rights – for media literacy enables civic participation, cultural expression and employability - it is certain that most cultures hope children will be critical media consumers, though not all provide, or can provide, the educational resources to enable this. However, the need for vigilance remains. In Europe, for example, media literacy is being repositioned as a strategic counterbalance to deregulatory moves to liberalise a converging market – put simply, if children can discern good content from bad, use media to express themselves, and protect themselves from mediated harm, then the burden of regulation can be lessened. Though debates over the purposes of media literacy are not new (Hobbs, 1998; Luke, 1989), what is new is the importance accorded to ‘new media literacies’ beyond the domains of entertainment, values and personal expression to encompass also educational success, competitive workplace skills and civic participation (see Hobbs). Spurred by pervasive discourses on knowledge societies and knowledge economies, policy makers and private stakeholders in many parts of the world are now urgently trying to identify and facilitate the human drivers of knowledge formation and sharing. Consequently, we can also see an academic reframing of what was once a rather specialised area for media practitioners and educators as a central issue for all concerned with people’s (and especially children’s) interpretative and critical engagement with all forms of media and communication. Media literacy will surely occupy a central place on the future agenda for children, media and culture. However, arguably too, (media) literacy is one form of cultural capital, as theorised by Bourdieu (1984), a means of conceptualising not only children’s potential but also the means of their exclusion, for literacy relies on cultural and economic resources, and these serve to divide or coerce as much – perhaps more - than they enable (see Pasquier, 2008).

While several researchers have long stressed the importance of the family in mediating children’s relation with the media (e.g. Hoover and Clark, 2008; Heller, 2008; Lemish, 2008), Pasquier raises a new question, namely the way that the family itself is changing in late modernity. Is this a story of growing individualism, as families become less hierarchical, more democratic, enabling the plurality of individual tastes rather than inculcating traditional values; or, on the contrary, do the media open the door to an increasing tyranny of the peer group, as teenagers fear the social stigma of failing to follow the latest fad or fashion? Perhaps these arguments are compatible – just as the multiplicity of – especially personal, mobile – media

permits some escape from parental supervision only to become subject to the scrutiny of one's peers (as suggested by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; see also Drotner, 2005). We need simultaneously to analyse trends in media and trends in childhood and the family, if we are to explain, and evaluate, social change in a meaningful fashion, avoiding the reductionisms of both technological and social determinism.

Political economists are keen to point out that the market benefits considerably from teenagers' constant desire to have the latest product, to try the newest service, to seek out the niche media that make them both 'individual' and 'cool'. For those contemplating any celebration of youthful creativity or active media engagement, Wasko (2008) offers a salutary check (see also Kenway and Bullen, 2001). Children are not only bombarded with advertising and marketing for the latest commodity but, arguably, as a new and profitable market, they have themselves been commodified, sold to advertisers as 'tweenies', 'kids' and 'teens' (Seiter, 1993; Smythe, 1981). Wasko's analysis of Disney and Neopets, to take two among many prominent cases of children's brands, develops the cultural circuit argued for by Buckingham and others integrating audience, text, production and market analyses. Yet here again, and notwithstanding Wasko's depressing conclusions, the debate remains open. For Jenkins (2003) and perhaps Ito (2008), Buckingham (2008) and others, the circuit is not closed. To be sure, the market capitalises on children's creative appropriations, but then children reappropriate, the market watches and responds, and children again get their turn. Perhaps the next stage of research is not to analyse the popular brands or their reappropriation by children, but rather to scope the – possibly narrowing - range of available choices, thus developing a critique of choice itself.

Intriguingly, the climate of academic opinion appears to be turning from distanced to engaged forms of critique, reflecting a normative turn in theory and research (Bennett, 2000; Habermas, 2006). Although emerging forms of critical engagement differ significantly from the administrative tradition long in evidence especially in research on children's media (as overviewed, for example, in Singer and Singer), both forms would concur that, as 'experts' on questions of children's play, learning, participation and literacy, it is incumbent on us firstly, to ensure that good research reaches those stakeholders who might act on it and, secondly and perhaps more contentiously, to ensure that particular outcomes which we judge to be in children's interests are supported. For example, Oswell's (2008) critical reflections on the regulation of children's media, especially but not only in the domain of advertising, highlight the risk that current regulatory developments may by-pass democratic scrutiny, tending to devolve the burden of regulation from states or public institutions either to commercial bodies (i.e. self-regulation) or parents (i.e. media literacy and domestic regulation). However, for academic researchers of children, media and culture, the interface with regulatory and policy debates is fraught with pitfalls, partly because these deliberations – though increasingly public – are often highly specialised in terms of both legal and technological matters, as well as fast-moving; moreover, the translation from evidence to policy, notwithstanding the stress on 'evidence-based policy', is far from straightforward.

There are further domains where critical engagement from children's media researchers is both much in demand from policy makers and less contentious within the academy. The potential for media, especially new media, to stimulate and sustain youthful contributions to the civic sphere is one such domain. Dahlgren and Olsson

(2008; see also Bennett, 2008) review attempts to use interactive media to facilitate political participation among a supposedly apathetic and disconnected youth. A further domain is the relation between human rights, children's rights and communication rights, as represented in Hamelink's (2008) advocacy of a communications rights agenda for children, in the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Extending the circuit of culture into the civic domain, Dahlgren and Olsson propose a circuit of civic culture driven by the dynamic interrelations among knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities. They conclude that we must see beyond the formal political system if we are to recognise youthful civic engagement, for a traditional lens brands youth as passively distanced from politics.

However, less optimistically, it seems to be youth who are already-active for whom the combination of new media and alternative politics is especially potent, possibly because so many are socialised – by media and other means – not into a culture of activism but rather into one of inefficacy and distrust. For these issues also, a comparative perspective is especially important, for societies vary in their approach to freedom of expression, norms of public engagement and, in consequence, expectations of children and young people. Noting the fundamental relation between mediation and cultural/individual rights, Hamelink advocates children's rights to express themselves, to be listened to, to privacy, to good quality information, to the avoidance of mediated harm, and to see their culture reflected and valued by others. In a statement that surely every researcher of children's media culture would sign up to, we quote from Unicef's Oslo Challenge, issued on the tenth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

"the child/media relationship is an entry point into the wide and multifaceted world of children and their rights - to education, freedom of expression, play, identity, health, dignity and self-respect, protection ... in every aspect of child rights, in every element of the life of a child, the relationship between children and the media plays a role."<sup>i</sup>

In support of an agenda for a globalised approach to children's media culture, this is a stimulating rallying call.

## **Conclusion**

We hope to have convinced readers of this chapter that children's media culture matters. It matters not simply because children comprise a quarter of the population in developed countries, while in developing countries as much as half of the population is under 15 years old. Nor is it because they are, as popular wisdom pronounces blandly, 'the future'. But also because, in the here and now, children and young people represent a vast economic market, a focus of both political despair and hope, a test bed for innovators in technology and design and, last but certainly not least, a creative, emotional and ethical force shaping continuities and change in values for societies everywhere. Children and young people cannot be contained in the domestic sphere, and in many parts of the world children have a keen public presence. They should not be rendered invisible by any wider or more abstract lens.

We have argued that universalistic claims about children and media must be critically interrogated, for the 'same' phenomenon evidenced in different contexts often

requires a different explanation. And we have shown how, in practice, this opens the way to an exciting terrain of new (and old but neglected) research on children's media culture. This means sidestepping – or contextualising as itself historically and culturally particular – the dominant American research tradition on children and media (Singer and Singer, 2001), both in order to recognise the diversity of our research domain and to avoid obscuring or 'othering' the non-American experience (Curran and Park, 2000; Lemish, 2007). Donald offers some stern injunctions to the research community, warning against uncritically applying findings from one culture or subculture to another, or against building assumptions into our methodologies that blind us to certain dimensions of children's experience or ignore the values embedded in language when we translate – literally or figuratively – across contexts. Nor can the contemporary researcher take their own experience as primary and project this unwittingly onto the rest of the world (Livingstone, 2003).

Both in order to substantiate these real differences, and in order to look for possible connections and commonalities across boundaries of place and social demarcations, we need comparative studies and what may be called contextualised conceptual developments. And while such larger studies are not easily conducted (or funded), the careful hedging of claims with qualifications and contextualisation is, perhaps, is a necessary and realistic strategy for individual researchers in a fast-globalising space of knowledge production. But at its best, a view that spans cultures, balancing both range and depth, offers the excitement of new questions and insights, critical reflections and challenging problems that stimulate a rethinking of long-held assumptions regarding children, media and culture.



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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.unicef.org/magic/briefing/oslo.html>, accessed 28/3/07.