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Children's Changing Media Environment: Overview of a European comparative study

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Children's Changing Media Environment

Introductory remarks

This article presents selected findings from a substantial multidisciplinary, multinational project investigating the diffusion and significance of media and information technologies among young people aged 6-17 years. The project has been conducted simultaneously by national research teams in each of twelve European countries - Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel¹, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (see Appendix). The national studies follow a common conceptual framework and methodology, incorporating both qualitative methods and a large scale survey involving some 15,000 children and young people across the 12 countries during 1997-8. This article highlights key similarities and differences among European countries concerning children and young people's ownership, access and time spent with a range of both 'old' and 'new' forms of media. More in-depth discussions of the comparative findings - both qualitative and quantitative - can be found in a Special Issue of the *European Journal of Communication*, (Livingstone, in press-a) and in a forthcoming book containing contributions from all national teams (Livingstone and Bovill, in preparation).

Project aims and overview

As the family home becomes a key site for the integration of telecommunications, broadcasting, computing and video, with satellite and cable television, computer games, Internet and other interactive media, already transforming the everyday lives of children and young people, research is needed to answer the many questions, and as many concerns, which arise from such changes. Will some be excluded from these opportunities while others live in an increasingly information rich environment? Will media contribute to the withdrawal from traditional leisure activities and even social and political participation? Will the media operate to strengthen local identities with locally produced programming or will they support the emergence of European identities as a genuine European television without frontiers develops? How do the new forms of media affect uses of older, more familiar media, and vice versa? Finally how far might these processes be determined by age, gender, class, region and country? Speculation surrounding many of these questions is widespread, but little rigorous empirical data has so far existed to throw light on the answers.

Our comparative research project aims to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of the role played by old and the new media in the lives of young people across Europe - including large and small, Northern and Southern, and monolingual and multilingual countries. We are examining how differences in social, cultural, economic and political structures both across and within European countries make a difference to children and young people's media use. By conducting original research

¹While Israel is not part of Europe, it was included to strengthen the representation of Mediterranean countries (it is linked to the European Commission for scientific purposes).

to identify the key similarities and differences in young people's access to and use of diverse media in their everyday lives, the research also aims to provide a benchmark for future research comparisons and a grounding for national and European policy formation in relation to the issues of provision, access, cost and regulation of the new media and information technologies. The specific objectives are as follows:

- to chart the extent to which access to and the use of new forms of media and communication technology is already widespread among young people, or whether this remains, particularly for more interactive multimedia uses, potential rather than actual;
- to generate a comprehensive and detailed description of children's current media-related activities and changing patterns of media consumption in order to identify those existing patterns of media use as a baseline with which future changes can be compared;
- to explore uses of media in relation to the material constraints, principles of choice and the role of stratification systems - social class, gender, education, etc. - in creating inequalities in media access, knowledge and use.

Conceptually, the project emphasises the notion of the "media environment (see Livingstone, in press-b). Thus we consider 'new' media in the light of older media - exploring uses of Internet and multimedia in relation to, and as in certain respects connected or contrasted with, uses of magazines, music or terrestrial television. We also locate media use in relation to non-mediated leisure, and we contextualise leisure in relation to other aspects of children and young people's lives. Changes in the media environment both add to the leisure options and may also transform the meanings of older media. And conversely, social practices established for older media frame the ways in which new media are appropriated into daily life.

Within this broader notion of the environment, we focus our attention on the children and young people in the household, as a complement to the common tendency to collect data from adults - whether reporting on themselves, their children, or the household as the unit of analysis. Indeed, compared with the high levels of public concern over children and young people's use of new media, little empirical research has considered this group specifically - with notable exceptions from the cultural studies tradition (Buckingham, 1993; Kinder, 1991; Seiter, 1993). For certain media, and certain European countries, research is particularly sparse, even though children and young people are often the early adopters of new media, and households with children have the highest rate of take-up for both familiar and new media goods.

Comparative research methods: a summary

Based on the research proposal developed by the British team co-ordinating the comparative project, a series of cross-national meetings were held to produce a multi-method research design of considerable scope, with an agreed core survey

questionnaire and interview schedules, to be applied in each country.² The national sampling encompassed young people of different ages, gender, and social/educational background in order to trace the different uses of new media across the population. The focus of research was on newer versus older forms of media³, on screen versus non-screen based media, on access and use at home, with a secondary focus on access and use elsewhere (particularly, at school), and on a host of factors which may contextualise media use within young people's daily lives.

All twelve participating countries completed the survey on nationally representative samples of children and young people, using the same core questions, as follows:⁴

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of interview</i>	<i>Ages</i>	<i>Sample size</i>
Denmark	School	6-17	1392
Finland	School	6-7, 9-10, 12-13, 15-16	753
Belgium (Flanders)	School	6-17	1000
France	School	6-17	1417
Germany	School	6-17	1258
Israel	School	7, 9-10, 12-13, 15-16	1100
Italy	School	13-14, 16-17	1472
Netherlands	In home	6-17	1355
Spain	School	6-7, 9-10, 12-13, 15-16	937
Sweden	School	7-16	1600
Switzerland	School	6-7, 9-10, 12-13, 15-16	1131
United Kingdom	In home	6-17	1303

In nine of the countries, in-depth individual and group interviews were also held, based on a common interview schedule, as follows:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of interview</i>	<i>Sample size (approx.)</i>
Denmark	Groups in school and day clubs	103
	Individual interviews at home	48
Finland	Groups in school	362
	Individual interviews at home	25
France	Groups in school	435
	Individual interviews at home	25
Israel	Groups in school and home	100
	Family interviews at home	40
Italy	Groups in school	250
	Individual interviews	5
Spain	Groups	50
	Individual interviews	5

²All teams conducted the substantial core of the research design, with additions according to national priorities, media provision and pragmatic considerations. Only equivalent data are compared directly.

³ The distinction between old and new forms of media is not entirely satisfactory, but it is intended to stress the time-scale of cultural appropriation of a medium rather than technological innovation *per se*. It contrasts the most recently introduced domestic communication technologies - those of public and policy concern, for which new domestic meanings and practices are now developing - with the more familiar technologies on which research has concentrated to date (see Livingstone, in press-c).

⁴ Further details regarding the survey (measures of media ownership, access, time use, etc.) are available from the authors on request.

Sweden	Groups in school	100
	Individual interviews in school	20
Switzerland	Individual interviews in school/computer camp	87
United Kingdom	Groups in school	200
	Individual interviews at home	50

Key comparative findings

The following discussion refers to Tables 1-6.⁵

Access to media at home

Tables 1 - 3 show access at home to different media - screen and non-screen, familiar and new, by gender, age and socio-economic status, for each of the 12 nations under study. Key findings are noted as follows.

Television and video. Across the European countries surveyed, television is near-universal and thus demographic differences play little or no role in relation to access. Access to video recorders is now nearly as high as for television, only dropping to around 70-80% of homes in Italy, Spain and Switzerland. Again, there is little scope for demographic differences, though in Italy, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent in several other countries, the SES trend is towards lower access in lower SES homes.

Cable/satellite. Access to a multi-channel environment via cable or satellite television depends on the broadcasting industry in different countries (and such questions could not even be asked in countries with near-universal cable provision, e.g. The Netherlands). Different factors operate - in Switzerland, it is the multiple national languages which support high cable provision, in others the small language community makes for a sizeable cable market (e.g. Denmark), while in the UK, accessibility of English language cable/satellite channels is balanced against high quality terrestrial television, resulting in a now-stagnant 40% take up overall for households with children.

Personal computer. Access to computers - with or without a CD Rom, and with or without a modem and Internet access - varies considerably from country to country. Relatively small Northern European countries have the highest ownership of computers (Denmark, Flanders, Sweden). The data suggest either differential diffusion trajectories, or different rates of hardware upgrading, for different nations as Finland, Germany, Israel, Spain and Switzerland are all more likely to have multimedia PC's than are Denmark, France, or the Netherlands. As often noted, Scandinavian countries tend to be high on IT ownership, while some relatively wealthy countries (e.g. UK, Germany) are not necessarily high on this measure. There has been considerable public anxiety about social grade differences in access to IT at home: in certain countries, inequalities are considerable in this respect (e.g. France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Switzerland, UK) while in others, whether high or low on IT, access is considerably more equitable (e.g. Denmark, Finland, Flanders, Netherlands, Sweden).

Internet. Internet access at home has been the subject of much speculation, and doubtless these data are changing further. The tendency for Scandinavian countries to lead on domestic IT is more pronounced here, for clearly Internet access depends on owning a PC. The Internet is now available in more than one quarter of homes with

⁵ Note that some caution is required in interpreting the tables, given inevitable variations in question wording following translation, as well as in base numbers, and in some national differences for measurement of age bands and socioeconomic status (SES). Note also that all tables are based on respondents in 4 age bands, so that 'all' figures do not represent the entire range 6-17 years.

children in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, as well as in Flanders and Israel.⁶ However, Internet access remains relatively rare in the larger European countries. Interestingly, there is a consistent gender difference here, with more boys than girls reporting having a modem at home, and there is also a tendency for homes with older children to have greater Internet access. However, the social grade differences are the most marked, with the highest grade being two or three times as likely to have Internet access as the lowest grade.

TV-linked games machine, books, telephone. There are few national differences in availability of the TV-linked games machine, though it is consistently more available to boys, tends to peak for the 9-13 year olds, and unlike other screen media, is more common in lower social grade homes. Books (defined in the survey as ‘a shelf of books, not for school’) and the telephone are near-universally available in the homes of children and young people. The UK shows the greatest social grade discrepancies here, with 3 in 4 of low SES UK homes having books or a telephone.

Personal ownership of media

Tables 1 - 3 also show personal ownership (access in the respondent’s own room) to different media - screen and non-screen, familiar and new, by gender, age and socio-economic status, for each of the 12 nations under study. Key findings are noted as follows.

Television. In contrast to the near-universal access to television in the home across Europe, having a television in one’s own bedroom varies considerably, with around 2 in 3 in the UK and Denmark having their own set, compared with 1 in 3 in France, Netherlands and Spain, and even fewer in Flanders and Switzerland. Demographic differences are considerable, with more boys than girls, and many more teenagers than younger children having their own set. Social grade differences follow no consistent pattern: in some countries, personal ownership of a television set is associated with the middle and lower class children (i.e. is rather avoided by the highest social grade, as in Finland, France, Italy, UK) while in others those in the middle social grade are more likely to have their own set (e.g. Germany, Israel).

Video, cable/satellite. Personal ownership of video recorders tends to follow the pattern set by television (and for videos in the home), being highest in the UK, Denmark and Sweden, and lowest in France, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland. Similar age, gender and SES patterns apply here too (more teenagers, more boys, more lower grade children). The picture for cable or satellite television again clearly depends on the pattern set by both television in the bedroom and cable/satellite television in the home, thus varying considerably from country to country (the highest being German and Israeli children with over one quarter having cable television in their bedroom).

Personal computer. As with domestic access to computers, personal ownership of computers varies. In some countries, most of those who own a computer lack a CD Rom (e.g. France) while in others, computers tend to be multimedia (e.g. Germany).

⁶ We should note that the Israeli sample, being composed of Jewish citizens only, is biased towards the better off.

The balance between household and personal ownership also varies: for example, in the Netherlands, the vast majority of households with children have a PC, but relatively few have one in their own room. In most other countries, while access at home is lower, a greater proportion have their own PC (e.g. Denmark, France). Unlike PC access at home, personal ownership is strongly gendered in most countries (the exceptions, interestingly, are France and Spain). Indeed, the gender differences are greater than those of age or social grade. Thus while boys far more likely to be provided with their own computer, age makes relatively little difference for those aged 9-17 (exceptions include France, where 6-7 year olds are as well provided for as older children, and Flanders, Sweden, Spain and Switzerland, where the older teenagers are clearly the best equipped).

Internet. Internet access in the child's bedroom is still rare, well below 10% of homes across Europe (with the exception of Israel). Trends by age or social grade are still difficult to discern clearly, though the importance of gender - as for all new technologies - remains strong. Interestingly, Internet access is relatively high - in the home and, to a lesser extent, in the bedroom, for those countries which are high on telephone access in the bedroom (see below), showing how Internet access depends on national differences in approaches to telecommunication provision as well as to computer access.

TV-linked games machine, books, telephone. Personal ownership, as a proportion of domestic provision, is high for the TV-linked games machine, clearly an individual possession, and owned by some quarter or third of European children, of whom twice as many are boys than girls, and of whom more are lower than middle or higher social grade. By contrast, books emerge as the only medium more commonly owned by girls than boys. For books, few national differences emerge except that once again, the UK children are the least likely to have books in their bedroom, with Italy and Israel following. Personal ownership of the telephone varies considerably from country to country, being particularly high in Israel, Italy, and Sweden, and particularly low in France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK. Within each country, this varies primarily by the age of the child rather than by gender or social grade.

Time spent with media

Tables 4 - 6 show the average number of minutes per day spent with each of these media - screen and non-screen, familiar and new, by gender, age and socio-economic status, for each of the 12 nations under study.⁷ Key findings are noted as follows.

Television. While access to television has reached saturation across Europe, considerable differences exist in the amount of time that children and young people spend watching television, from around one and a half hours per day in France, Switzerland and Germany, to over two and a half hours in Denmark, Sweden and the UK. In most, but not all countries, boys watch slightly more than girls, lower grade children rather more than higher grade (as with media ownership, the extent of these

⁷ The 'all' figures in Tables 4-6 describe the demographic category, including non-users of the medium. The 'users only' figures refer only to those who ever use the medium, and thus base sizes for some media (especially the Internet) are relatively small. Note that most countries did not ask 6-7 year olds questions regarding time use, so comparisons for this age group are not included.

differentials vary according to broader differences in the degree of social stratification in a country - thus differentials in the UK exceed those of Scandinavian countries), and teenagers consistently watch considerably more television than do younger children. Largely, then, usage patterns follow those of television ownership in the bedroom.

Video. Not all young people watch videos, and so time spent watching videos can be measured for all young people or just those who watch, the discrepancy between these figures therefore indicating how widespread video use is within a country. Broadly speaking, those who watch a lot of television tend also to make the most use of video, though the exceptions are important (e.g. video use is low in the Netherlands, doubtless because of the high cable access, and it is relatively high in Israel, otherwise low on television viewing). By contrast with television, demographic variations in video use are slight.

Music. After television, children and young people spend most time listening to music, thus reinforcing the importance of considering screen media in relation to other kinds of media. Around one hour per day is spent with music, with Swiss and Israeli young people the greatest music enthusiasts, and Flemish, German and Dutch young people spending relatively less time on music. As expected, there is a strong trend to listen to more music as children become teenagers (though recall the same trend for television viewing), and there are no clear social grade differences. Gender differences - with girls listening to more music - are marked in Denmark, Finland, Israel, Switzerland and the UK but not in Flanders, Germany, or the Netherlands.

PC and computer games. As Table 5 shows, time spent playing computer games (on any machine) exceeds that spent using a PC for other purposes; for users only, this is especially clear in Denmark and Finland, while the picture is more balanced in Netherlands, Flanders and Spain. The preference of boys over girls to spend time with computers is marked in all countries, but most especially for game playing (see also the figures for use of the TV-linked games machine). For those with access to a PC, young people may spend up to one hour per day using it in the Netherlands, but less than half an hour in Germany or Finland, inviting further research on the uses made of the PC. Yet in most countries boys especially who play computer games are spending at least one hour per day in this way (thus approaching the amount of time they spend on television). There is a tendency, despite some inconsistencies, for older children to spend more time with the PC (not for games) while younger children spend more time playing games. In several countries, the 'all' figures for time spent using the PC (not for games) show social grade inequalities (e.g. Finland, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, UK) but these all but disappear when we consider users only (Finland is an exception here). For game playing, there are no social grade differences in evidence.

Internet. The Internet occupies a growing amount of young people's leisure time in Europe. Considering only those who do use the Internet, figures range from around 10 minutes per day (e.g. Finland, Italy, UK) up to over half an hour (Netherlands, Israel), thus approaching the amount of time spent reading books. Notably the Netherlands and Israel tend to have a high proportion of English language speakers (making the relatively low use of the Internet by UK young people in need of further explanation). While generally more used by boys, as with other computer-based media, there are no consistent trends in age or social grade for Internet users.

Telephone. With the exception of Israel, use of the telephone occupies relatively few minutes per day, yet it is widespread, with all those in the countries who included these questions making use of the telephone, for perhaps quarter of an hour per day.

Books. The telephone is more used by girls than boys and by teenagers than children. Books represent another girls' medium, occupying in general between half an hour and one hour per day of those who read at all but clearly more of girls' time than boys'. Unlike most other media, time spent with books shows a consistent decline with age when considering each age group overall ('all' figures) although among those who read, the time spent does not decline. In several countries (e.g. Finland, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, UK) reading is more common in the higher social grades, although again the amount of time spent by readers varies rather less.

Conclusions

Despite all the hype - both optimistic and pessimistic - about the social and psychological impact of the new media, detailed empirical research shows that the context within which the new media technologies are finding a place - more so in some countries than others - is a complex one. The place of media in everyday life depends not only on the technological characteristics of different media but also on the social, economic and cultural processes of diffusion and appropriation, so that different factors make a difference for different media, resulting in a complex pattern of opportunities and inequalities in access and use. While we have here considered both national and demographic factors, others concerning public policy and market strategy for different media are also important. Certainly no simple claims can be made about old versus new, or print versus screen media, for example; thus some countries are relatively high for both print and audiovisual media (e.g. Finland) while others are relatively low for both (e.g. Germany). On the other hand, British children, for example, stand out as being heavy screen media owners and users and low book owners and readers, supporting public concerns about the displacement of reading by television.

Generally speaking, audiovisual screen media (television, video) are now at saturation point for European households, so there is little national variation in access (although the proliferation of multiple sets does vary cross-nationally, depending on cultural values as these apply both to screen media and to the communal or individual nature of family life). As information and communication technologies are only now diffusing through Europe, at different rates depending on national policy and market conditions as well as on national culture, there are considerable national as well as demographic variations in the domestic access that children and young people have to the personal computer, the multimedia computer and the Internet.

Furthermore, patterns of household access to media differ from those of personal ownership by children and young people, indicating different determinants for household and individual ownership of media. Thus, countries vary in how they balance common against individual ownership of media. For most media, household access varies little according to the age or gender of the child, but is generally

associated with social grade. This association is generally positive (e.g. computers, Internet, video) but occasionally negative (e.g. TV-linked games machine). By contrast, personal ownership of media depends primarily on the child's age and/or gender (e.g. television, computer).

Finally, clearly there can be no direct mapping of access - particularly at the level of the household - on to children's time use. However, some associations do emerge. For example, higher television viewing figures may be seen to reflect higher figures for personal ownership of television sets. Alternatively, both together may be taken as indicative of greater or lesser stress placed on television as a leisure activity (compare, for example, Denmark to Switzerland). The exceptions are nonetheless important: for example, while Germany and Israel were highest for multi-channel bedrooms, they are among the lowest for television viewing, indicating the importance of cultural factors (including those concerning rival leisure activities) which mediate between media provision and media use.

In conclusion, certain cultural and household factors determine which media children and young people have access to at home, yet other factors determine which ones they have personal ownership of, and yet further factors affect the time they spend with these different media. For example, Van der Voort et al (in press) draw on a variety of contextualising factors (concerning both the media systems and other national characteristics) to understand relations among domestic media access, time use, and uses and gratifications for 'old' and 'new' media in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Johnsson-Smaragdi et al (in press) develop the notion of patterns of time use in particular to construct a typology of old and new media users across three countries (Sweden, Germany and Flanders) differing in media access and cultural practices. Pasquier et al focus on the specific context of the family, showing how differences in patterns of authority and regulation within the home have consequences for media use by children and young people (here, in France, Flanders, Italy and Sweden). Despite the importance of these and other contextualising factors in understanding patterns of media ownership and time use, certain generalities can also be identified. Suess et al (in press) show how common developmental trajectories hold, with some variations, across countries which differ considerably in media diffusion (Spain, Switzerland and Finland). And Lemish et al (in press) draw on qualitative material from the project to trace how globalized media are appropriated by children and young people in a variety of local contexts.

While the ongoing task of the project is to identify and separate out these factors, in this article we have documented the key national and demographic variations in household access, personal ownership, and time use for both older and newer forms of media. We hope that these data will inform both further research and policy formulation in the area of children, young people and the changing media environment.

Tables 1-6

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APPENDIX: The European Comparative Project

Directed by the British Team, the European comparative project, *Children, Young People and the Changing Media Environment*, has been supported financially by the Broadcasting Standards Commission (UK), the Youth for Europe Programme (EC-DGXXII), and the European Science Foundation. Each national team obtained national funding from a variety of academic and industry sources (see below).

Denmark

Institution: Centre for Youth Media Studies, University of Copenhagen

Team: Dr Kirsten Drotner and Dr Gitte Stald.

Funding: Danish Telecom (Tele Danmark), and The Danish Ministry of Culture.

Finland

Institution: Universities of Jyväskylä, Tampere and Helsinki.

Team: Dr Annikka Suoninen, Riitaa Koikkalainen and others.

Funding: The Academy of Finland, The National Children's Fund for Research and Development (ITLA), The Finnish Public Broadcasting Company (YLE), The University of Tampere (Department of Communication) and The University of Jyväskylä (Research Unit for Contemporary Culture).

Flanders/Belgium

Institution: Nijmegen University.

Team: Dr Leen d=Haenens.

Funding: The Department of Communication Studies, University of Ghent (Belgium), and The Department of Communication, University of Nijmegen (the Netherlands).

France

Institution: Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris

Team: Dr Dominique Pasquier, Dr Josiane Jouet, Dr Eric Maigret, and others.

Funding: France T919vision, Canal Plus, CNET, and T919rama

Germany

Institution: Hans-Bredow Institut für Medienforschung University of Hamburg

Team: Dr Uwe Hasebrink and Dr Friedrich Krotz

Funding: Hamburgische Anstalt f/r neue Medien (HAM), Ministerium f/r Arbeit, Gesundheit und Soziales in Nordrhein-Westfalen, Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Fernsehen (FSF).

Israel

Institution: Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.

Team: Professor Tamar Liebes and Dr Dafna Lemish

Funding: Yad Hanadiv Foundation, The Israeli Council for Cable Broadcasts and The NCJW Research Institute for Innovation in Education, School of Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Italy

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Funding: The University of Trento, RAI.

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Funding: The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and The Dutch Broadcasting Organisation (NOS).

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Switzerland

Institution: University of Zurich.

Team: Dr Daniel Suess, Professor Heinz Bonfadelli.

Funding: Institute of Communication and Media Research IPMZ at the University of Zurich, Teacher Training Department SLA at the University of Berne, TA-Media AG, Zurich, Euro-Beratung Zurich and Intermundo Berne.

United Kingdom

Institution: Media Research Group, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Team: Dr Sonia Livingstone, Dr George Gaskell and Dr Moira Bovill

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