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## Thoughts on the appeal of 'screen entertainment culture' for British children

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## Thoughts on the Appeal of 'Screen Entertainment Culture' for British Children

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We can no longer imagine leisure, or the home, without media and communication technologies. Nor, for the most part, would we want to. Yet as the media environment changes around us, many questions arise about the meaning, availability and use of media in daily life. Insufficient research has yet been conducted, with the result that discussions of 'new media' often rest on extrapolation from the past combined with speculation about the future. The starting point for the research project I shall present here was in 1995 when I was invited to update Hilde Himmelweit's study from the 1950s – a study conducted at LSE of the introduction of television into British households based on the comparison of those with and those without TV.<sup>1</sup> The idea for the new project, therefore, was to conduct a wide-ranging empirical study exploring the place of new forms of domestic screen-based media in the lives of young people aged 6-17.<sup>2</sup>

Since the mid-50s, there have been many changes in the lives of children and youth as well as in the media environment; there have also been many changes in social science research. In designing a study for the 1990s, we felt it had been too restrictive before to focus on 'the child' or 'television' in isolation, for media use should be understood in its social context. If media use is not put into context, research on children and young people can transform them into the Internet addict, the screen-zombie, the social isolate, failing to appreciate that media use accounts for only part of their lives. In any case, a neat experiment<sup>3</sup> such as Himmelweit's comparison of children before and after they got a television would not be possible for the computer or the Internet: describing media access for young people in the 1990s means mapping complex combinations of diverse media. We also felt it had been too restrictive to see children as the object of media effects, for they are actors in the household and community, co-constructors of the meanings and practices of their everyday lives. If we forget to see young people as actors as well as acted upon, we miss understanding their experience of the media. We also then find it hard to transcend our often nostalgic perspective to see how taken-for-granted these media may be for young people themselves, as well as seeing the new skills and opportunities that these media may be opening up for them.<sup>4</sup>

### **The research project**

The introduction of new policy media technologies into the home opens up a huge agenda for researchers, policy makers and the public. This three-and-a-half year research project, whose main findings I will present here, began with some specific aims within this broader agenda. These were to research new screen-based media available to 6-17 year olds, asking:

- Who has what media, old and new?
- Where and when are they used?
- What do media mean to young people and their families?
- How do media fit into everyday leisure contexts?
- What are the social inequalities in access and use?

Thus, without setting out to make specific policy recommendations or value judgements about young people's media, the purpose was first to find out about their use of new media, with the focus on those aged 6-17. And second, to understand what these media mean to children and their families. As of course, research along these lines will continue in coming years, the project also aimed to set a baseline for future comparisons. Researching 'new media' means studying a moving target. Our focus is on the video recorder, cable and satellite television, the personal computer, video games and the Internet, on the assumption that the electronic screen will become ever more important in everyday life.

I first reported on the study at its very beginning, at the Manchester Broadcasting Symposium three years ago.<sup>5</sup> Now at the end of the project, I can report on some findings. As my title indicates, I shall focus on the domestic screen, asking about how the meaning and use of the screen may be changing as the PC joins the TV as a vital piece of household equipment, and as the screen takes up a new role vis-à-vis older media, especially print media.

How did we go about researching young people and the new media? The point here was to combine qualitative and quantitative methods, as each tells different parts of the story, and to include the views of children and young people, parents and teachers, using a diversity of methods especially for the younger children. Thus methods were as follows:<sup>6</sup>

- face-to-face survey with 1303 children
- self-completion survey with 978 parents
- group discussions with 150+ children at school
- interviews with children/parents in 32 homes
- time budget diary of media use (334 children)
- interviews with teachers in 12 schools
- interviews with Internet users.

The project was conducted simultaneously in a number of different European countries, allowing us to make direct comparisons.<sup>7</sup>

### **Finding time for new media**

Contrary to the much-hyped idea of rapid change which is often supposed to follow the introduction of new media, our research shows some rather slower, but thought-provoking changes. New media must be fitted into our homes and

into our busy timetables – and it is clear from our research that many children are living highly organised, busy lives.

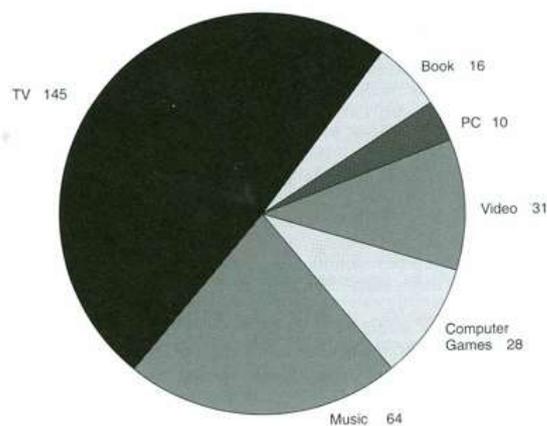
Estimating time spent with media is always difficult, and on this project we have given it considerable thought. However, it seems that children and young people are spending roughly five hours per day with assorted media (see Figure 1). ‘Assorted’ is key: for it seems that the new media are old media. Television and music still occupy most time.

Those with cable or satellite television do not spend much more time watching television than those without (though some do),<sup>8</sup> and those with a PC at home don’t spend huge amounts of time using it (on average, non-games use occupies about an hour, two or three times a week). Displacement remains one of those questions always asked about but rarely answerable: in the report we find few indications that it is actually happening, though possibly those who make more use of screen media may read less.

Rather, as the lessons of history would confirm,<sup>9</sup> it seems that new media are supplementing rather than displacing or substituting for former media, thereby prompting the specialisation of previous media. Hence we see the content and use of books becoming more specialised (eg for horror, at bedtime), and the same for video (again, for horror, and to watch with friends). And we begin to see the use of television becoming more specialised as the locations of sets multiply (eg before breakfast, at bedtime) – though at present its continuing success rests on the diversity of its appeal.

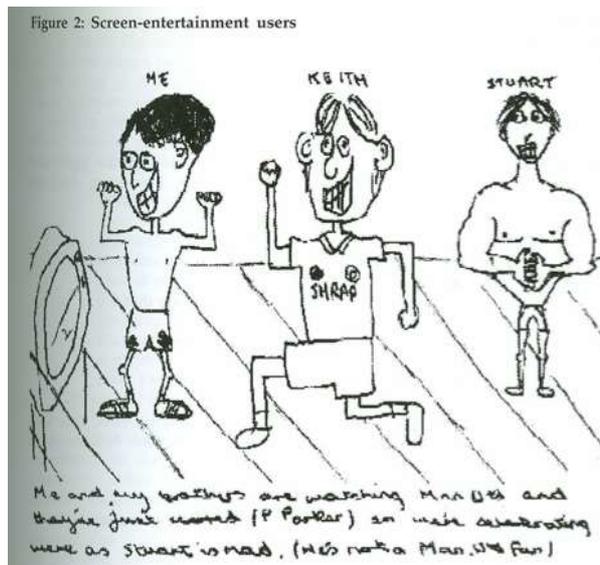
What really is changing is the *flexibility* to combine different media in different ways to make up an individualised leisure lifestyle. We analysed these lifestyles in several ways, and there are two points worth stressing here.

Figure 1: Average minutes per day spent with media (all UK 6-17 year olds)



First, age matters: as children grow older, they often shift from being relatively low users towards being more *specialised* media users: teenagers especially put together the particular selection of media which suits them and which they see as expressing their identity, and then pretty much ignore other media, apart from television. We found three types of specialisation – those which centred on music, on books, and on the personal computer.

Second, we find a large group of children – especially boys, and especially those aged between 9 and 14 – who we call ‘*screen entertainment users*’. And these are the children many people worry about: they watch a lot of television, play a lot of computer games, watch videos, etc. Certainly, this occupies a lot of time: the heaviest computer games players, who play for about 12 hours a week, also watch TV for some 20 hours a week. These children are sports fans – sport is their favourite interest, their favourite computer game, their favourite television programme, their idea of what makes you popular with your peers.



Yet, we do not find these children to be isolated screen-zombies – far from it. Though many have their own television and games machine in their bedroom, they spend the least amount of time there compared with the other groups of media users we identified. Instead, they are keen to watch and, especially, to play computer games with friends and family.

### Screen entertainment culture

Significantly, these children represent the leading edge of a trend which is strong across British households generally, and which perhaps says more about our cultural values than about these children specifically. Certainly, we found that many children and young people are enthusiastic about screens of all kinds, often in preference to books. Consider this response to a word-association task in a group discussion:

Int: Games console, PlayStation?

- Electric.
- Good.
- Exciting.
- Your hair's sticking up.

Int: Shelf of books?

- Boring.
- Boring.
- Literature.
- Dumb.

*(Class of working-class boys, aged 15-17)*

This conversation was typical of many, contrasting enthusiasm for print and for the screen. Children talked about books as boring, frustrating, and not trendy any more:

Int: What is the most boring thing on the table?<sup>10</sup>

– It's got to be the books.

Int: Right, what is so boring about the books?

– You open the pages and 'No, I'm not reading that'.

– There's too many pages.

– And there's hardly no pictures.

– The writing's really small.

*(Class of working-class boys, aged 15-16)*

It is also noteworthy, for example, that as the survey findings show, once they have a PC at home, children are less likely to turn to a book to learn about something:

– Computers you can learn like. You can do all sorts of interesting things on it – you can like have countryside things on it, and you just learn off them.

– And some computers you can go to the Internet.

– Yes.

Int: Why can't I just do that from a book?

– Well because when it's on a computer, it's like showing you all what you can do on it, but in a book you're just reading it and it gets a bit boring.

*(Class of middle-class girls, aged 9)*

So, for today's young people, it is television which provides a good story, and the PC which provides all the information one could ever want. Whether, as a result, books are being squeezed out, is unclear. Overall, there is little evidence of an overall decline in book reading: Himmelweit found forty years ago that children on average read for about 15 minutes per day, and in the late 1990s, we find the same.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as children and young people themselves see it, the screen is the key medium for leisure – as well as for school, work and the future!

From our comparison of young people's media use across Europe, it is clear that Britain stands out in its adoption of what we've called 'screen entertainment culture'. This newly-emerging screen entertainment culture is reflected in the priority which British families give to screen media goods and the pleasures they derive from them, and also in the ways that children make use of them. For example, unlike for print media, those who make a lot of use of one screen medium also make a lot of use of others; thus, those who watch a lot of television are also more likely to play computer games and make more use of the video.

What is the experience of screen entertainment culture? When children talk about *computer games*, the words which appear over and over are 'control', 'challenge', 'freedom':

– I prefer games like Super Mario – you want to just control them and jump on the mushrooms... And I like Super Mario because it's just really like a challenge kind of thing.

*(Working-class girl, aged 9)*

– One of my friends just calls himself God when he's playing. I have a lot of names, I mean usually I have, Inertia's my favourite.

– It's first person perspective, so you look through the eyes of a player.

– Now I'm sort of more alive, more free to do what I want.

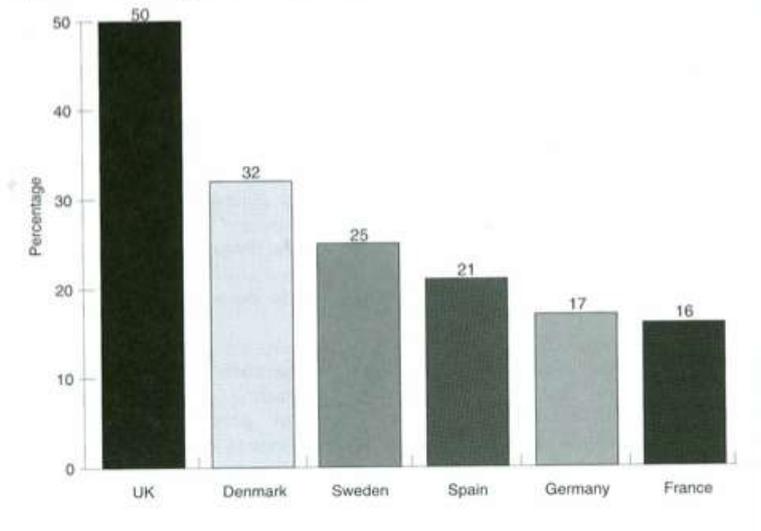
*(15-year-old boys in cybercafé)*

The comment here about computer games, unlike most other media, being experienced in the first person is especially revealing of the intensity and immersive nature of the experience. Television programmes are rarely discussed in this way, though for favourite programmes, concentration can be intense. Television provokes two responses. As a medium, it is 'boring', meaning that it fills gaps when there's nothing else to do, yet it is essential for just that reason. But as a source of favourite programmes it is 'great'. Television is not new but deeply familiar, though cable/satellite channels are still new, if not hugely interesting but for a small number of channels.

This picture is, of course, familiar to us. Yet interestingly, our European comparisons suggest it is a very British picture in some ways. British children are more likely than those in other European countries to have their own screen entertainment media and to spend longer each day with them.<sup>12</sup> To take one telling example, we find that 6- to 7-year-olds in the UK are the most likely to have television in their bedroom, and the figures for video recorders and TV-linked games machines follow a similar pattern (see Figure 3). By contrast, only 68 per cent of this age group in the UK have books in their bedroom, compared with over four-fifths in other countries. Moreover, viewing figures mirror these trends. Average time spent watching television for UK 6- to 17-year-olds is two-and-a-half hours a day – up to half an hour per day more than in Sweden and Spain, and as much as an hour per day more than in Germany and France.

Doubtless our long-established tradition of high quality public service broadcasting for children and families is important in understanding the British focus on the screen as a source of entertainment. However, programming is moving away from this tradition and what appears on our screens is increasingly likely to derive from, and be regulated by, Europe-wide or even global companies and regulators, rather than a national media industry or national regulators. In this respect, therefore, the distinctiveness of Britain's 'screen entertainment culture' may lessen.

Figure 3: Percentage of 6-7 year olds with TV in own room



### The attractions of screen entertainment for British children

Explaining why screen entertainment is so attractive for British children takes us away from a focus on the media per se. All our evidence suggests that British children are not natural couch potatoes:

- If you're with your friends you probably wouldn't bother with TV, you'd want to go out and do something because, just TV's something you watch if you're - well unless it's like a cliff hanger and you want to know what happens - when you're bored and you've nothing else to do.

*(Teenage girl)*

- I'm not allowed on the road on my bike so I am usually stuck at home watching TV or something or reading a book... When we want to get out we try and get out but sometimes we have done everything and that's all that there is to do and it is just so boring. There is really nothing to do around here.

*(Teenage boy)*

Access to public spaces outside the home is crucial. We find that British young people are far more dissatisfied than their European counterparts with the *provision of leisure facilities* in the area where they live: two-thirds overall, twice as many as in other European countries, complain of a lack of things to do in their area. Second, parents express relatively *high level of fears* for their children's safety outside the home: only 11 per cent of parents say the streets where they live are 'very safe' for their child, compared with 56 per cent thinking this about the neighbourhood where they were brought up when their child's age.

None of this is simply a matter of income, class or geography, though the perceptions of children and parents may be very different in this respect. Consider this example: here we contrast an interview with a middle-class family with three boys aged 10, 13 and 14, living in a large, well-equipped house in an unspoilt rural area two miles from a tiny village, with an interview with an Asian mother, living in a working-class area where unemployment, racial tension and

crime rates are high. This family live in a shabby small semi-detached flat above the corner shop where both father and mother work for long hours: there are two children, a boy of 7 and a girl of 5:

- We have done the usual things, like they have been in air cadets and they have been to scouts... I think it is still quite unspoilt. We have a boating lake nearby so the facilities around here are quite good. But in the winter we have to take them to the cinema because there are no buses. We give them the mobile phone and ... come and fetch them home.

*(Middle-class mother of teenage boys)*

- There's a new water park, but er I'm very reluctant to take them there... It's mainly older children on their bikes and they are, er, hanging around... It's quite frightening as well sometimes when I take them to the park... I'm with him all the time. I wouldn't feel safe to let him go out on his own.

*(Working-class mother of a boy, aged 7, and a girl, aged 5)*

In the eyes of their parents, the leisure opportunities available to the children in these two families are clearly very different. The attractions of the external environment and its perceived safety could not be more contrasted. Yet from the children's point of view, things seem very different. The three middle-class boys, for all the beauty of their rural surroundings and the wealth of structured leisure opportunities which surround them, feel isolated. In this account, television was introduced by the children into the conversation in terms of a second-best activity – something they did when not able to be outdoors and with their friends. By contrast, despite the difficult surroundings and their parents' fears, the two Asian children have readier access to their friends and a more positive attitude towards their leisure time.

- I'm not allowed on the road on my bike so I am usually stuck at home watching TV or something or reading a book... When we want to go out we try and get out but sometimes we have done everything and that's all that there is to do and it is just so boring. There is really nothing to do around here.

*(Middle-class teenage boys)*

- I play out... I ride my bike. Sometimes I go round the block with my friends... I go up this road and if I am allowed I cross the road all the way up there. But the Nursery is at the top, so I stop and come back. I am allowed to do that if I ask my Dad or my Mum.

*(Working-class boy, aged 7)*

This preference for being outdoors was almost universal amongst the children and young people we talked to and, irrespective of age, it was the social aspect – *the opportunity to be with friends* – which was the primary attraction.

### **'Bedroom culture'**

Nonetheless, it seems that the easy attractions of an increasingly personalised media-rich environment *inside* the home means that for many British parents,

*equipping the child's bedroom represents an ideal compromise in which children are both entertained and kept safe.* To put it another way, a media-rich home may be a *response* to the lack of interesting, affordable and accessible places to go outside the home. Thus we find that children are as likely to have a television set in their bedroom (63 per cent) as they are to have a shelf of books that aren't school books (64 per cent), while 34 per cent have a TV-linked games machine and 21 per cent have a video recorder.

From around nine years old children's bedrooms become important to them as a private space for socialising, identity display and just being alone:

Int: So your bedroom's a private place in fact?

– Yes. My personality's expressed... I spend most of my time in my bedroom or going out. Not in <I>. There's nothing to do in <I>.

*(Working-class girl, aged 16)*

– It's like a flat at the moment (laughs).

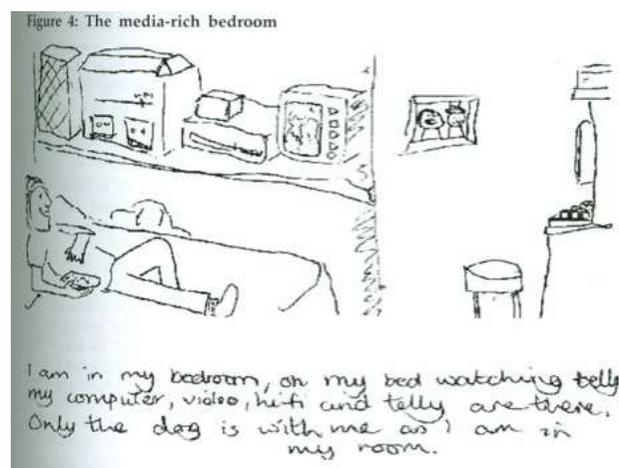
Int: And is it just how you want it?

– Yes. Just how I want it. I mean I have decorated it how I want it and it's just like a room I don't think I will ever move out.

*(Working-class girl, aged 15)*

New media especially are status symbols and welcomed as such as well as for their entertainment potential. Interestingly, it is not only wealthy parents who are providing their children with a media-rich bedroom. Some poorer families are equipping their child's bedroom at the expense of the rest of the house, while some richer families prefer to equip the living room with media for shared use.

Indeed, our survey shows that while access to new media at home is, as ever, primarily a matter of household income, by contrast, when we look at media in children's bedrooms, we find that household income matters rather little. However, for equipment in the bedroom, the child's age and gender matters a lot, and – interestingly – parental education is also important. To put it simply, with the exception of books, *older children have more media in their bedroom, as do boys, and as do those with less well-educated parents.*



The consequences for gender are interesting: bedroom culture has traditionally been thought of as for girls,<sup>13</sup> but as the bedroom becomes more high-tech, it may be increasingly a space valued by boys. Moreover, we find that girls are

most restricted in their access to outdoors, yet they are also less well provided for in their bedrooms.

This is not to say children and young people wish to hide away in their bedrooms: we asked them to describe a 'really good day' and a 'really boring day'. The *really good day* included going to the cinema, seeing friends and playing sport – all outdoor activities, while the *really boring day* was a day at home with the media, including, at the top of the list, watching television, reading a book, watching a video.

While there is little that is *technologically* new in having a media-rich bedroom, it is socially new – changing how children use media. Those with particular media in their own room spend more time on those media. And many children prefer to watch television alone – away from family interruption. Nearly one in three with their own TV say they usually watch in their bedroom after school and in the evening, and they are twice as likely to watch their favourite programme alone. Further, one in three children with their own TV say they watch television in their bedroom after the 9pm 'watershed', including 28 per cent of the 6- to 8-year-olds.

Does it matter if children watch television in their own rooms? Perhaps not, provided only the current, well regulated, four or five channels are available. We don't yet have a clear view of what will be arriving on the television screens in the coming years, nor, therefore, of how children may respond to them. Most presume that there will be both benefits and dangers: certainly children welcome channels dedicated to them, to music, to sport, to comedy. But concerns about solo viewing – where parents can't easily look over the child's shoulder at what they see, or casually measure if a child seems anxious, or chat afterwards about something frightening – clearly focus on the potential dangers. Parents themselves are ambivalent about their children having a television in their own rooms:

– <J> has her television on when she is sort of sitting in there <in her bedroom>. Which I didn't approve of... I feel that she is not in here with us that much then. I like us all to be together. But she has got to have her space.

*(Working-class mother of a 15-year-old girl)*

– Yes, he watches it [TV in bedroom] but I'm always worried and tell him to come and watch cartoons with me instead but he says 'No mummy I want to watch this' and he tries to sneak it on at around 9 o'clock as well. Sometimes I'm sure that he's asleep and I go into his room and he's got the telly on and he's sitting there watching telly.

*(Working-class mother of a 7-year-old boy)*

This second quotation raises the question of rules at home for using media.

### **Regulating the young**

Since the 1950s, when Hilde Himmelweit conducted her study, the circumstances under which national and domestic regulation operates are drastically transformed. The household of the 1950s was proud to acquire one television set, place it in the living room and watch it as a family (or, argue as a family), seeing the same programmes as the rest of the nation. Households in the

1990s, especially those with children, are now acquiring multiple televisions and, in lesser proportion, multiple VCRs, computers, music centres, games machines and telephones.

We have gone from the box-in-the-corner, only available for part of the time, to a media-saturated home – where staying home often *means* using media. Television has moved from the centre of family life in the living room to a balance between communal and separate use, from the mainstay of the family evening to a round-the-clock experience, and from a nationally-shared experience to a more individualised one. As one commentator put it, we are increasingly ‘living together separately’.<sup>14</sup>

– We have the CR-ROM, and television – all the boys have got them so we have five upstairs and there are (counts), five downstairs.

Int: Is that because of the multiplicity of channels?

– It’s the multiplicity of children! (laughs)

Int: Do you have different tastes?

– Yes, I think that we do really, everybody is very individual, erm and it also allows everybody to relax in their own way and in their own time.

*(Middle-class mother of three teenage sons)*

How should children and young people’s media use at home be regulated? While over the past half century television has been routinely vilified as a source of many social ills, it now appears that *national regulation of media for children and young people was at its height precisely when – with hindsight – there was least cause for concern*. Although Himmelweit’s conclusions were that television has rather few, weak and contradictory effects on children, her report (*Television and the Child*, 1958) was influential in policies which established a highly regulated, paternalistic children’s broadcasting culture, with careful scheduling according to idealised notions of children’s viewing habits, with the ‘toddler’s truce’ in the early evening, heavily restricted advertising on the new independent channel and reassuring, ‘parental’ figures presenting the programmes.<sup>15</sup>

Today, broadcasting for children and young people is under increasing commercial pressure, threatening the continuation of budgets, scheduling slots and creative programming for children and young people, while global imports are competitively priced, and programming designed for adults is increasingly accessible to children. At the same time, national regulation is ever more difficult to sustain: there are too many channels for regulators to monitor and global broadcasting (and certainly, global Internet sites) escape national legislation. As audiovisual and information-based technologies are set to converge – with digital television, web-TV, tele-web, etc – national regulators are faced with near-impossible challenges in classifying, restricting or scheduling that which appears on our screens. Interestingly, the diversifying media environment not only sets practical problems for regulators, but new moral problems also arise. With increasing scope for sociocultural factors to determine who engages with which media and why, matters of meaning, preference, identity and pleasure are no longer incidental but are becoming central to the policy process.

It may seem that the simplest solution is to pass regulatory responsibility (back) to parents. After all, it is parents who decide whether to give their child a

television set, which cable or satellite channels to subscribe to, and when their children should go to bed; and it is parents who know what frightens their child and which values they wish to promote in their family.

Figure 5: Domestic regulation of media



At present only 12 per cent of parents (though many more children!) say they have no rules for children watching television. But the new media environment makes their task ever more difficult, and children and parents do not always even agree about the present situation regarding domestic regulation:

Father (to Interviewer A in living room):

- We censor television. We draw the line usually at the 9 o'clock watershed.

Son, age 13 (to Interview B in other room):

- They tell us to go up at about 9.30 or 10 or something, and then we just watch TV until they come up and tell us to switch it off.

Son, age 10:

- They shout at you and tell you to turn it off.

Int: When do they tell you to turn it off?

Son, age 13:

- At about 11, 11.30.

From parents' standpoint the very factors which make the new media environment nationally less easy to regulate also make it domestically less easy to supervise. Many parents feel they have little understanding of the computer games or Internet sites that their children use. And parents also find it hard to monitor the many channels their children see – at home, in their bedroom or at a friend's house. As most children over eight years old prefer to watch family/adult rather than children's programming, and as many are watching in their bedrooms – they may slip through the net of regulation at both ends – production and reception. In short, we observed little enthusiasm among parents for taking on a more restrictive approach to their children's media use: over the past half century, parents have come to rely on national regulators and wish to continue to do so.

### **Information technology**

While the proliferation of media within the home is changing how media are used, the changes which accompany technologically new, computer-based media, are potentially even greater. I turn now to that newest screen of all, the personal computer, with its CD-ROM and, attracting most attention at present, access to the Internet. These media are being treated differently by children and young people, in crucial ways, from television, video, and even games machines. For this reason, I have thus far stressed '*screen entertainment culture*', rather than '*screen culture*'. Moreover, importantly, our European comparisons show that Britain is not 'ahead' in the computer age as it has been for television. By comparison with key European countries, children and young people in the UK have less access to the PC, multimedia computers and the Internet at home (see Figure 6).

Incidentally, this is not because British children are not interested in these media: when asked which medium they would like for their next birthday, a PC was top of the list among those who don't already have one. While their parents feel computers at home are becoming inevitable, children are positively enthusiastic:

– All I know is that I can see computers being as much part of the home as the TV and video.

*(Middle-class mother of a 7-year-old boy)*

Int: A multimedia computer with CD-ROM: what do you think when you see that?

– I want that.

– I want that.

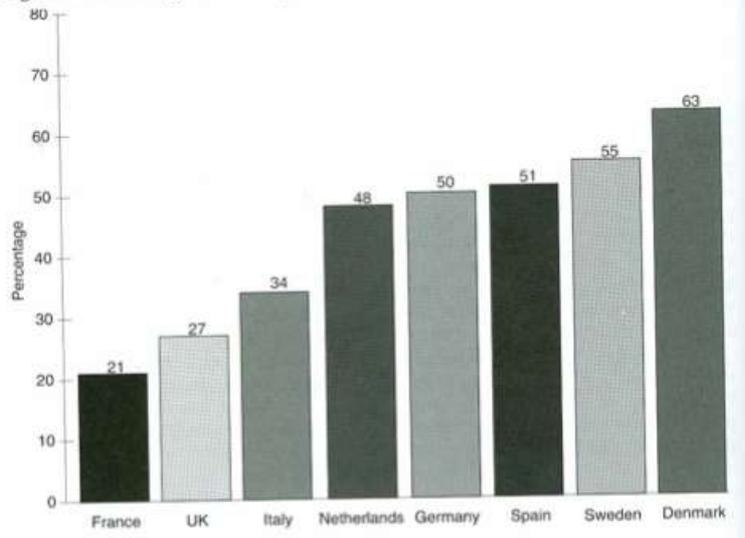
– I want it.

*(Class of middle-class 12-year-old boys)*

When we consider developments in information technology at home, the crucial point to stress is the danger – already evident – of reproducing old inequalities in relation to new technologies, particularly social class and gender. In other words, the gap between the so-called 'info-rich' and 'info-poor' is presently being exacerbated rather than reduced by new technologies.

In British homes, we find that 12 per cent of children have a PC in their bedroom; however, parents are generally locating the PC elsewhere in the household – 53 per cent of children have one at home. This is stratified by gender and social class, in rather different ways. Middle-class children are much more likely to have a PC at home (68 per cent vs 40 per cent) but, interestingly, working and middle-class children are equally likely to have a PC in their bedroom. However, while boys and girls are equally likely to have a computer somewhere in the home, boys are twice as likely as girls to have a PC in their bedroom (16 per cent vs 8 per cent).

Figure 6: Percentage of 15-16 year olds with PC with CR-Rom at home



Intriguingly, these figures – of about half the population having a computer of some kind – mirror those for Himmelweit 40 years ago, when just under half the population had television. At present, the PC is seen very positively by parents, although computer game playing and the Internet are posing some familiar problems (eg fears about harmful contents, distraction from books), but is *not* as yet demanding a complete rethink of the family living room or family use of time. We may speculate that as television has spread throughout the house, the PC, as its uses proliferate and entertainment potential develops, may follow.

We asked children a lot of questions about their knowledge of, and use of, the *Internet*. This is one of the areas where change is most rapid, and new surveys keep updating us on how many have access. Thus perhaps more important than our finding that one child in five (19 per cent) has used the Internet themselves (and even fewer, for Email) are our findings regarding the emerging patterns of use.

We find that twice as many have gained experience of the Internet at school than at home. Use is still rather infrequent – less than once per month, and for less than an hour at a time. Again, use of the Internet at home depends heavily on social class, with ownership being nearly entirely middle class (14 per cent vs 2 per cent). Even visiting a friend to use the Internet is more common among middle-class children, especially boys.

Those with experience of the Internet tend to be ambivalent – finding the potential exciting but the actuality often frustrating:

– It's talking to other people in like America or something.

*(Working-class boy, aged 15)*

– Using the Internet is slow and boring, but there is a lot of stuff to be there if you persevere... I mean you find something good once in a while but that's about it.

*(15-year-old boy)*

– It's just a big world... You're in control... There's a lot of choice that you have... It's like an alternative life.

*(Middle-class boy, aged 12)*

- We've got the Internet and stuff, but my Dad doesn't know how to work it so we can't use it.  
*(Middle-class girl, aged 12)*

At present, the cultural meanings of the PC, CD-ROM and Internet are not fixed, so this is a key moment for addressing social inequalities. Young people are uncertain whether to associate those technologies with print or with screen entertainment, with an encyclopaedia or with communication with friends. Whatever adults think, it seems likely to be the latter rather than the former associations which young people will find encouraging: those who have found the communicative possibilities of the Internet, or the games potential of multimedia, are the most enthusiastic.

### **The school as a potentially 'equalising force'**

Addressing inequalities of access is not enough. Having a computer at home is not much good if you can't get the software to run, can't get the modem to work, haven't understood the financial costs involved, don't know where to go in cyberspace, or how to evaluate what you find. In other words, as ownership of the PC spreads throughout society, inequalities in so-called 'cultural capital' ('know-how') become ever more important for actual use.

The classroom represents a great opportunity to redress imbalances created at home, as for working-class children in the UK school is twice as likely to be their only source of access. However, it appears that inequalities at home pose a *challenge* for schools, and getting computers on the desk at school is only the beginning.

Comparing those with PC access at home and at school, it is clear that the PC is used more often at home, and much more for fun, while the computers at school are often seen as less impressive by those who have superior equipment at home and so are more criticised:

- These computers are crap.
  - There are about three good computers and that's about it.
  - They're all rubbish, like kiddies' computers...
- (Middle-class girls, aged 12-13, with computers at home)*

Having a computer at home is not the only source of inequality: as we see in the quotation below, some parents are less able to support their children's use of the computer for school work than are others:

- Int: Do you know much about what he's doing on computers in school?
- He doesn't talk about it [but] he must obviously be able to work it, you know, do something with it, but it really is double Dutch to me. I just never took an interest in them at all.
- (Working-class father with 10-year-old boy)*

The difficulty for teachers, as a result, is that they find it divisive to draw on children's experience with computers at home, even though the PC was bought by parents precisely to help with school work; they also feel the educational

benefits of IT to be unclear, and the training/resources they receive insufficient as yet.

### **What do children and young people want from the media?**

While adults are often ambivalent about a media-dominated future for children and young people, young people themselves are generally enthusiastic and eager to be part of what we've termed 'the changing media environment'. Children enjoy playing with the new imagery offered by technology and its vocabulary already permeates their everyday thinking. Asked to imagine their ideal bedroom in the year 2000, they spontaneously talked of 'interactive' screens, a 'cyberwardrobe' which would pick clothes to suit your mood, a phone 'where a different boy answers every time you pick it up', and best of all, the 'virtual mom' who can doubtless be switched on and off when required.

As the 13-year-old girl who drew the picture in Figure 7 said:

- I'm going to have a cyberwardrobe, when you walk through it, it puts clothes on for you. It depends on what mood you're in, and then it's going to have a shoe wardrobe that changes your shoes for you, and then I'm going to have a sand bed with sand underneath it because I think that would be wicked... And then a TV like a cinema screen, then a glass floor right...

While adults speculate about the future, children themselves rarely share that idealised image of childhood – for them there is no clear opposition between being a carefree child playing hopscotch with friends in a nearby park, and being a child with music on the headphones watching television in her bedroom. Rather, children and young people like to combine media and non-media activities in ways which allow them to express their identity and which serve as a basis for their friendships. They like talking about music or television while playing or messing around with friends in the park, they like swapping media goods – especially high status and less available new media goods such as computer games, CDs or videos – and they like visiting or having their friends to visit them in their bedroom (so as to share their latest computer game or music CD and escape an irritating little brother!).

Figure 7: My ideal bedroom in the year 2000



In short, their lives are unthinkable without the media, but the media remain subordinated to young people's interest in, and desire to be with, their friends, in two ways. First, most positively they are the 'meat and drink' on which friendships are based, as I've just outlined. Second, the media fill the boring, frustrating gaps between being out with friends and school, family obligations etc. In consequence, in response to the often high level of anxiety which surrounds children, young people and the new media, one conclusion might be: *don't panic!* We found few if any children who are socially isolated by their use of media, or spending huge amounts of time with media, or upset by programmes they'd seen or sites they'd found on the Internet.

In the past, most media research has focused on adults or the family as if the life and interests of young people may be just assumed from this. By contrast, our research on *Young People and New Media* reveals what children and young people might think about these media and how they use them. It also considers how and why they often represent the early users of new media, in what ways they may be more flexible or open-minded users, and how for them the media often serve as the very currency through which they express their identities and live out their relationships with others. Thus the report addresses many issues of access, content preferences, social contexts of use, etc which I have not been able to note here. I'll end with the children's wish list, as it emerged from our research. This would stress: primarily, and *unrelated to the media* – more parks, clubs, cafes – safe, affordable places to meet friends outside the home. But as regards the media – they want...

- television channels for them, rather than limited, scheduled slots, but channels/programmes which don't patronise them as little kids;
- for girls, computer games which appeal to them – a long-standing call, in the new media age, but one which is slow to be met;
- more playful or unsupervised access to IT at school, but also better integration of computers into teaching and better guidance for Internet use.

Those of us watching today's children might well add to that list...

- continued high quality, varied range of broadcasting for children and young people;
- content-based indications of what is contained in programmes which parents may wish to regulate or discuss with their children;
- extension of current television literacy programmes in schools to include computer/Internet literacy (making children ever more 'screen-wise');
- significant effort put into addressing domestic, social class inequalities in access to information technologies;
- more listening to the perspectives and concerns of children as well as those of their parents and teachers.

### Notes

1. Himmelweit et al. (1958).
2. Coordinated by the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the research project entitled 'Children, Young People and the Changing Media Environment' was directed at LSE by the author. It was funded by the Advertising Association, the British Broadcasting Corporation, British Telecommunications plc, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, ITV Network Ltd, the Independent Television Commission, The Leverhulme Trust, STICERD LSE, Yorkshire/Tyne-Tees Television, European Commission, European Parliament, European Science Foundation.
3. The powerful feature of Himmelweit's design was that for the introduction of television in some parts of Britain but not others meant that comparisons between those with and without, or before and after, television were unconfounded by those factors which lead some households to acquire a new medium before others.
4. The theory and background to the project are discussed in the full report, *Young People and New Media* (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999); see also Livingstone (1998) and Livingstone and Gaskell (1997).
5. See Livingstone and Gaskell (1997).
6. The data were collected during 1997, and the headline 'facts' of young people's media use have been reported then and since. But the main purpose of our study – as an academic study rather than a piece of market research – was to put these 'facts' in context, including in an international comparative context, and to examine this rich body of data in depth. The report now published reflects that work in making sense of the findings, identifying complex patterns, trends and meanings associated with media use. Full details of the research design, sampling and methods, as well as discussion of terminology and measurement issues, are contained in the report.
7. These were Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland.
8. On average, children and young people spend an extra quarter of an hour watching television if they have cable or satellite television at home, though girls aged 9-11 and boys aged 12-14 spend up to an hour per day more (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999).
9. See Marvin (1988).

10. This question was asked, of a set of pictures of 11 media, only after the group had themselves introduced the term 'boring' into the discussion.
11. This average is somewhat misleading – we also find that 43 per cent of 6- to 17-year-olds never read in their leisure time at all, and those that do spend about an hour reading on 3-4 days per week. The question of long-term displacement is a fraught one which is beyond the scope of this paper (see Livingstone and Bovill, 1999).
12. Livingstone, Holden and Bovill (in press).
13. McRobbie and Garber (1993).
14. Flichy (1995).
15. See Himmelweit (1996), Oswell (1995), for a discussion of the impact of *Television and the Child* on broadcasting policy.

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