

Media and Children: The Changing Landscape

We live in an era plagued by a new and changing media landscape—a landscape that includes mature-rated video games, R-rated movies, explicit-lyric music and a culture of false advertising. Unfortunately, children become consumers and targets of this media at a young age, and often, parents are not present to promote media literacy and appropriate consumption of this media that has a negative influence on child development. Considerable research is now being devoted to the harmful effects of such media consumption on our nation's youth. The key, however, is adapting to our changing media environment by promoting media education and literacy for parents and children alike.

But what exactly is changing about our media? The midpoint of the 20th century saw TV, radio and records, movies and some forms of print media dominate our consumption habits. Into the 21st century, the changing landscape has seen the evolution of satellite television, the DVR, personal computers, and perhaps the largest culprit, the World Wide Web.¹ The way in which children are obtaining this new technology is changing. Children have continuous access to media, ranging from a television set in the bedroom (68 percent) to video game console in the bedroom (49 percent).² It seems as though media use and exposure is simply a part of our current social construction, so it

¹ Donald F. Roberts, Ulla G. Foehr, and Victoria Rideout. Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. March 2005. 15 Dec. 2007. 1-2. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds-Report.pdf>>.

² Donald F. Roberts, Ulla G. Foehr, and Victoria Rideout. Executive Summary: Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. March 2005. 15 Dec. 2007. 10-11. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Executive-Summary-Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds.pdf>>.

would prove to be very difficult to avoid the changing media because of its widespread availability and presence. Instead, members of our media-centered culture, parents and children must adapt to the changing social construction.

Much of the current scholarly research suggests that pervasive consumption of this “new” media is connected with short and long-term academic and behavioral problems. While this can be true, there are two sides to the same story. The Kaiser Family Foundation’s study found that there is not a statistically significant correlation between academic achievement and media consumption habits.³ While there is a positive correlation between those that earned A’s or B’s and overall time spent reading print media, as well as negative correlation between acquiring good grades and playing video games, the numbers don’t differ to a great extent from those A or B students and the amount of time they spent playing video games. In short, earlier studies reveal that amounts of media use are negatively correlated with academic performance. The current structure indicates that this correlation is either very small or non-existent. However, academic performance is not the only potential variable related to youth media consumption.

Sociability and the way children interact with one another is another potential effect. Previous research indicates that television watching is negatively correlated with “contentedness” or general satisfaction with their lives in general. Current research confirms these trends, significant because the research conducted took into account the changing media (i.e. video games, Internet and computer use, audio use, etc.).

³ Kaiser Foundation, Generation M 47-48.

Furthermore, the Kaiser study indicates a positive correlation between sensation-seeking and media use, particularly in the realms of video game use and television exposure.⁴

In addition, the media has a profound effect on how youth and adolescents view themselves, especially in light of how the media paints the picture of the “ideal” teenager. In a 2006 study,⁵ early adolescents (ages 9-14) were questioned about how they see themselves in relation to the media they use on a regular basis. In short, the results indicate that the media pressures not only females but also males to be thin, to increase muscle size and in some cases based on age, to gain weight. Clearly, much is at stake: sociability, happiness, ideals regarding body image and sensation-seeking behavior among our nation’s youth.

Media outlets are now targeting the youngest of children starting with newborns, an indicator of how prevalent this new media has become.⁶ 83 percent of youth aged 0-6 are exposed to a screen on a daily basis. Nearly all (99 percent) live in a home with a television and 77 percent are actively involved in this media by turning on the television themselves. Even the youngest children are now involved in this changing landscape, not by the help of a parent, but as consumers themselves.

The common solution, it seems, would be for parents to be more involved in the lives of their children and to monitor their media consumption. A common

⁴ *ibid.* 49-50.

⁵ Z. Lawrie, E.A. Sullivan, P.S. Davies, and R.J. Hill. "Media Influence on the Body Image of Children and Adolescents." *Eating Disorders* 14 (2006): 355-364.

⁶ Victoria J. Rideout, Elizabeth A. Vandewater and Ellen A. Wartella. [Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers](#). The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Fall 2003. 15 Dec. 2007. 4-6. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds-Report.pdf>>.

misconception is that children are always consuming this media alone, behind closed doors. The Kaiser research indicates that might not be the case.⁷ The 20 percent of children that watch television for more than five hours per day also reported spending the most amount of time with their parents. Does this mean that children are consuming this new media alongside their parents? It is likely. However, our society is still conflicted in regards to how best to get messages of media literacy across to youth. As it stands, parents either are failing to address the changing landscape, or are falling into the same media trap just as their children are. Parents claim to be interested in teaching “civility, self-control and a meaningful way of understanding the world,” but the current reality is that parents are accepting changing social constructions and empowering their children to make their own decisions regarding media instead of monitoring these decisions.⁸ The answer to this increasingly prevalent problem is to encourage grassroots organizations to convey to parents how to empower themselves to be the parent—and how to take the power away from a screen.

According to professor of education and political science at Stanford University James Steyer, “Media today is everywhere. It’s all around us ... young people are more media savvy than we ever were.”⁹ Steyer says that the media shapes values, societal expectations and a sense of what is cool and not cool. He also points out the immense impact that the media has over our nation and us as individuals. The media shapes how

⁷ Kaiser Foundation, Executive Summary: Generation M 14-16.

⁸ Kay S. Hymowitz. "Parenting: The Lost Art." American Educator. Spring 2001. 15 Dec. 2007 <http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2001/parenting.html>.

⁹ James Steyer. “Television: The Other Parent.” Midday. Minnesota Public Radio. 1 Dec. 2003. 15 Dec. 2007. <http://www.publicradio.org/tools/media/player/news/midday/2003/12/01_midday2>.

foreign nations view America, and because the media industry is an unregulated free market shaped by short-term motives and promise of profits, those images have very hazardous implications especially because the media puts on display our values and is very relevant in how other nations view America. The spreading of this message is key because it seems as though parents and society in general often disregard the effects of new media and its availability among our nation's youth. Instead, a focus on how media consumption affects our nation as a whole seems more realistic and more effective, which has the potential to then address the interaction of media and children.

But where does this focus begin? It begins with us as individual consumers of media. Throughout this discussion, the positive aspects of media are ignored, but parents and children alike must embrace the positives. The positives are the learning opportunities that present themselves as media is consumed. From the bottom up, there needs to be interactions between parents, teachers, educators and children about the media that has come to dominate our culture. Individuals should look at the media industry with a critical eye, and question those in power why there is not a checks and balances system in regards to programming, nor subsidized educational programming as there is in every other western industrialized country.¹⁰

The development of a media literacy curriculum seems most beneficial, especially in a culture in which the rapid development and availability of new technologies have severely outpaced the development of any type of curriculum urging smart consumption. Our media is constantly changing and is being targeted to younger and younger children,

¹⁰ *ibid.*

so this type of curriculum needs to be devised for audiences ranging from pre-school aged to high school-aged children. These courses need to aim at teaching how to decipher and decode reality from media constructions. Sixth graders were the subjects of a recent study where the goal was to analyze how a media literacy curriculum might affect students' attitudes of television violence.¹¹ The results indicate that students made "measurable progress" in developing an understanding of media literacy. The sixth graders, after completion of the curriculum, understood three principles of media literacy: "media as constructions of reality, the presence (and absence) of particular values in media, and the responses of audiences to media." All in all, it seems that curricula such as this one promote a heightened awareness of the media that surrounds us. As far as media and violence, students can learn to decipher between reality and what our media portrays as real, while learning how to appreciate and understand the culture in which we live.

Changes in the way we consume media need to begin with the decisions made by you and me. Citizens need to be involved and engaged in the media in which they consume. We must look at the big picture and the effects of the media on not only children, but on our nation as a whole in order to address "children and media." As it stands, there is significant research that suggests that our media culture has a significant correlation between media use and sociability, sensation seeking, levels of happiness and ideals surrounding body image. The next challenge is using this data to empower parents

¹¹ Erika Scharper, "Sixth Graders Take on Television: Media Literacy and Critical Attitudes of Television Violence." Mass Media. Ed. Joan Gorham. Dubuque: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Matt Tiano
17 December 2007
Media Studies 160
Final Exam

and children to engage in the deciphering of messages that promote the values that shape us as individuals. And that, it seems, begins with you and me.

Works Cited

- Hymowitz, Kay S. "Parenting: The Lost Art." American Educator. Spring 2001. 15 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.aft.org/pubs/reports/american-educator/spring2001/parenting.html>>.
- Lawrie, Z., Sullivan, Davies, and Hill. "Media Influence on the Body Image of Children and Adolescents." Eating Disorders. 14 (2006): 355-364.
- Rideout, Victoria J., Elizabeth A. Vandewater and Ellen A. Wartella. Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Fall 2003. 15 Dec. 2007. 4-6. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds-Report.pdf>>.
- Roberts, Donald F., Ulla G. Foehr and Victoria Rideout. Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. March 2005. 15 Dec. 2007. 1-2. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds-Report.pdf>>.
- Roberts, Donald F., Ulla G. Foehr and Victoria Rideout. Executive Summary: Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Executive Summary: Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds. March 2005. 15 Dec. 2007. 10-11. <<http://kff.org/entmedia/upload/Executive-Summary-Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds.pdf>>.
- Scharper, Erika. "Sixth Graders Take on Television: Media Literacy and Critical Attitudes of Television Violence." Mass Media. Ed. Joan Gorham. Dubuque: McGraw-Hill, 2007.

Matt Tiano
17 December 2007
Media Studies 160
Final Exam

Steyer, James. "Television: The Other Parent." Midday. Minnesota Public Radio. 1 Dec.

2003. 15 Dec. 2007. <http://www.publicradio.org/tools/media/player/news/midday/2002/12/01_midday2>.