

CHAPTER 12

RESEARCH AND POLICY CONCLUSIONS

12.1 OVERVIEW

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 technologies themselves are changing rapidly, many questions arise concerning their place in our daily lives.

This research project set out to explore the implications of changing media technologies for children and young people in Britain. To set this inquiry in context, we have also considered the implications of 'new media' for families, parents, teachers and communities. In this report we have answered some of these questions and stimulated yet more. As we hope this report has shown, investigating the place of media in the lives of children and young people is hugely revealing of those lives more generally.

Before developing our main conclusions, let us reiterate the objectives of the project:

- to chart current *access and use* for new media at home (and, in less detail, at school);
- to locate new media uses in the context of a *comprehensive* account of domestic leisure and media activities;
- to *understand the meaning* of the changing media environment for children and parents;
- to map access to and uses of media in relation to *social inequalities* and *social exclusion*;
- to provide a *baseline* for media use against which to measure future changes.

We began with the premise that it has been too restrictive, even misleading, in past research and policy debates to focus on 'the child' in relation to 'the television' or 'the screen' in isolation from the rest of their lives. Thus we have argued for, and hope to have demonstrated the effectiveness of, a thorough contextualisation of media use within the lives of children and young people.

Methodologically, this stress on context has required a multi-method, multi-focussed enquiry which has generated a rich body of empirical material, both qualitative and quantitative. This has allowed us to pursue the meanings and impacts of media as experienced by young people, while also conducting a variety of statistical analyses which interconnect, or segment, the 6-17 year old population according to particular research questions or empirical contingencies.

The project has generated a wealth of specific findings and detailed arguments. While the very diversity of media provision and use makes generalisations about 'children' or 'the media' hazardous, in this final chapter we draw together some of the broader themes in order to reflect upon their implications for both academic research and media policy.

12.2 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: A DISTINCTIVE GROUP?

The temptation for those trying to anticipate changes in domestic media is to focus on the level of the household - charting household possessions, parents' views, etc. - without recognising that this picture will miss significant aspects of the meanings, access, use or expectations of new media for children and young people.

12.2.1 Young people as enthusiastic adopters of new media

Certainly, it seems that children and young people are particularly confident and enthusiastic adopters of new forms of media, generally sharing a forward-looking perspective which is not just desirous of, but also interested in, 'what's new, what's cool'. Children express little fear of change or the future, and are open to the ways in which the media may provide resources with which identities are constructed, with which time and space is organised and made personally meaningful, and which accompany and shape peer culture.

This broadly positive attitude to new media from children fits with the sense of responsibility that parents feel to support their children in an 'information age', and with the enthusiasm of fathers (rather more than of mothers) for technological innovation. Thus children and parents, though sometimes for different reasons, agree on the advantages of acquiring new media for the home (although they are more likely to disagree over the disadvantages which result).

12.2.2 Children as actors within the household

Yet it may be for rather more pragmatic reasons that households with children tend to lead in the adoption of new media. Given the complex dynamics of family life, acquiring new media goods appears to offer solutions to the many competing claims on time and space which characterise domestic arrangements at the end of the century. It is important here to recognise the role of children within the household as constitutive, contributing to the construction and reproduction of family life, and hence of media uses, rather than simply shaped by parental resources and decisions.

We have suggested that children make a particularly significant contribution to the diversification of media uses within the home through their eager adoption of multiple media goods within both shared and personal spaces. Their relatively casual use of many media throughout the day may also be fuelling the shift from the focal to the peripheral or background use of screen media. And as the mediation and regulation of children's use of media by parents is primarily a matter of workable practices, usually negotiated implicitly between parent and child, rather than one of parental anxieties or principles, children play a key role also in domestic regulation. It is these ways, rather than in terms of their supposedly consumerist, competitive or acquisitive tendencies, that children represent not just a minor part of society but also a market to be taken seriously.

In consequence, children and young people cannot be simply subsumed within an account of the household or the family but represent a sizeable and distinctive subgroup of media users (or audiences) in their own right.¹ Of course, although often it is adults who define the spaces within which children exist, there are many parallels and connections between adult and children's 'lifeworlds'. There are also some key contrasts between the strategies of parents, with their principles, rules and greater power, and the tactics of children, as they manoeuvre within and around these to create their own lifeworlds (de Certeau, 1984). Similarly, in schools we glimpsed the contrast between the optimism and fears of teachers and the pragmatic realism of their pupils. Household uses of new media, family life and classroom activities all result from the negotiated fit between children and adult perceptions and practices.²

¹Children and young people did not prove to be an inaccessible or impossible group to research; rather children and young people welcomed us into their lives, their bedrooms and classrooms, happy to describe and discuss their lives and the place of media within these. Nonetheless, researching children and young people brings its own challenges methodologically: children's spaces are often not the public spaces of the household; and children's understandings of technologies and time, to take two pertinent examples, required us to rethink our adult-centred questions and categories. Researching this age range also required us to grapple with two less than ideal research literatures: media-centred research tends to problematise, even pathologise children and young people as vulnerable, deviant or manipulated; childhood research tends to celebrate the creative innocence of media-free leisure, implicitly demonising the media as a source of difficulty or distortion in children's lives.

²Thus we would concur with the social constructivist approach to childhood which argues that, through their daily activities often unnoticed by adult eyes, children contribute to the construction and reproduction of social structures within which both adults and children live.

12.3 SOCIAL DIFFERENCES AND INEQUALITIES

While we have suggested that children and young people are significant actors within the household, they do not all share in equivalent resources. Rather, children and young people represent a diverse population, not readily reduced to simple categories of 'the child' or 'youth'. There are many ways of conceptualising this diversity: here we offer an overview of the project findings in terms of the key social stratification variables of age,³ gender and social class. These represent both the key structures of societal and household organisation and the dimensions of media access and use to which policy is oriented.

The shift from an empirical charting of differences to the identification of social inequalities is crucial for targeting policy intervention. Across the range of media, it would be a fair generalisation from our research to say that inequalities in *gender* predominantly arise from differences in content and content preferences, while inequalities in *social class* predominantly arise from differences in media access at home. Our qualitative work especially suggests that both of these inequalities, neither of which is itself new, are now shaping young people's understanding and use of the new media environment.

12.3.1 Age

Age as 'restriction'

Not only do we lack a term in English for those aged 6-17, but parents and young people themselves are in many ways uncertain of what is appropriate or required at different ages. Whatever their age, young people themselves strongly wish to be a few years older, for to them being older is the key to freedom of access to and control over leisure choices and opportunities both within and beyond the home. While parents are greatly concerned about the children's safety outside the home, they express relatively less concern about media use within the home.

Young people's concerns are rather different from those of their parents, for their overriding concern is with having somewhere to go outside; while we were asking about media use, instead we got a powerful complaint about the absence of public leisure facilities. Where, young people asked us again and again, are the affordable and accessible meeting places - cafés, parks, swimming pools, cinemas, skating rinks, youth clubs, etc.? This dissatisfaction puts the relatively lesser concern of parents with the domestic regulation of media into perspective. It also leads us to suggest that public discussion regarding children and young people might usefully shift from a typically protectionist stance to one focussed on more positive provision, albeit in the public rather than domestic arena.

Media access and use

When we focus on actual practices of media use, we discover a variety of age-related trends. Interests (which guide preferences within and across media), not surprisingly alter with age, and while preferences actually tend to become slightly more homogeneous as children become teenagers, the expressed culture of individualism results in much talk about unique identities and hence, unique media tastes.

Media uses depend in large part on media provision. In the home, there are rather few differences according to the age of the child interviewed, but their bedrooms become increasingly media-rich with age, to the point where most teenagers have their own hi-fi, television set and walkman, and many also have their own video recorder, games console and, increasingly, personal computer.

Possession of books, however, declines with age, and this also means that reading books becomes less common as children grow older (although to some extent, magazines for girls and newspapers for boys take their place). Other media show a peak in middle-late childhood (e.g. computer games), while still others become more widespread, and occupy more time, as children grow up (e.g. music).

³For age these might better be termed age trajectories than age inequalities for while we have noted many age-related differences in both access and use, in contrast to the situation for gender or class there is no general expectation that young people of different ages *should* be treated equivalently.

Overall, younger children are more likely to be relatively low media users overall, while a large proportion of teenagers can be said to live 'media-rich' lives, often making more specialised use of media. In the main, however, whether use is relatively high or low, for most young people the media diet is a varied one, and we found few young people who make predominant use of just one medium.

Age and IT at school

Young people may or may not have access to computer-based media at home, depending primarily on the social class of their parents (see below). However, their experience of such media is significantly altered when they reach secondary school age, and it is clear that on various dimensions, use of IT leaps forward at this point. Whether young people's competence in the use of IT would be enhanced should they be introduced to it earlier is a question beyond the scope of this report, but it seems that primary schools are at present relatively ill-equipped - in terms of both facilities and training - to make much use of IT at this level.⁴ As a result, much IT experience before the age of 11 stems from the home rather than the school, and is thereby heavily influenced by social class inequalities.

There is an interesting tendency for 'serious' (i.e. non games) uses of computers, as well as enthusiasm for computers, to decline after about 14 years old. Without longitudinal data we cannot say whether this is an age or a cohort effect (i.e. does this particular cohort of 15-17 year-olds have less interest because they were older when the introduction of computers in home and school gathered pace?).

12.3.2 Gender

Content preferences

Gender represents a major divide in the interests and media preferences of children and young people. Over and over again, for a variety of media and non-media leisure activities, boys tend to congregate around an interest in sport while girls show a greater preference for narrative media. For some, these divisions are experienced as restrictive, but for the most part there is little expressed dissatisfaction, and both boys and girls appear to find sufficient media appropriate to their tastes. An interesting exception to this was the increased television viewing seen among younger girls and older boys in cable or satellite homes, suggesting that either those without this multichannel environment are relatively ill-served by terrestrial television or that these groups particularly opt for more specialised broadcasting where available.

Interest in different content leads to girls and boys preferring different media. Girls' pleasure in using the telephone and (for those few with convenient access) in emailing friends, flags up the importance for them of direct *communication* with others. Boys are more enthusiastic in general about *computers*. They are both interested in them as technologies and more likely to see them as fun, associating them more than do girls with game playing.

However, the primacy of content preferences suggests that if we wish to encourage more girls to use PCS or boys to read, efforts should be directed at improving the relevance of the content to their main interests. More books about sport and competition? More adventure or other narrative-based computer games with female heroines?

⁴We note that despite a widespread discourse surrounding the 'obvious' value of introducing information technology into the classroom (this being a discourse which both preceded and is also stimulated by present Government commitment to 'the Learning Society'), teachers found it difficult to articulate to us exactly what the educational advantages of this are. The best account they could offer included a stress on transferable skills (into the workplace), on the possibilities for both team-working and individually-paced work (especially appreciated for special needs pupils), and on encouraging responsibility for one's own work; but the difficulties of establishing exactly what advantages may accrue from familiarity with IT is making at least some teachers sceptical.

Access to media

With the exception that more TV-linked games machines are to be found in boys' homes, there are few gender differences in media access in the home in general. But we found considerable differences in the provision of media in children's bedrooms, with boys generally being better provided for, particularly as regards screen media, including their own personal computer. Girls have few advantages in access, and even though they are more likely than boys to read, use the phone or listen to music, they are not more likely than boys to have their own books or telephone or hi-fi. Yet it is girls who invest their bedrooms with greater meaning and personal importance.

Given that girls are also more restricted in their access to places outside the home, it would seem that girls lose out on both home-based and outside leisure opportunities. The combination of media equipment and public freedoms intersects, on occasion, to boys' advantage: they are more likely to have friends with computers to visit, and they are more likely to frequent cybercafés where new media are available; thus any increase in public provision of IT facilities will need to guard against the subtle exclusion of girls.

Time use

Looking across time spent with different media at home, there are several gender differences. Screen-entertainment fans (those children who combine computer games, television and video as their predominant entertainment mix) are far more often boys while girls are generally less screen-focussed, though they read more and listen more to music. As it is these screen-entertainment fans who tend to attract outside adult concerns (regarding addiction, violent contents, escapism, etc.), it would appear that boys are both better equipped with media and yet also the subject of more concern, while girls appear relatively neglected on both counts.

This may become an issue as more and more media converge upon, and become accessible through the screen (unless girls' preference for print 'off-line' can somehow be transferred to 'print' on the screen). Certainly when it comes to computers, girls are likely to say that boys' experiences in game playing stand them in good stead, encouraging their confidence and familiarity with computers (interestingly, neither parents nor teachers agree, both tending to disdain computer games as an activity).

IT and gender at school

In terms of overall provision of computers and access to computers at school, there are few gender inequalities, although some do exist for actual use of IT at school. Both girls and their teachers tend to believe in gender differences in confidence if not competence. Beyond trying to separate girls and boys into different groups, teachers offer few ideas of how to deal with the tendency of girls to lose interest in computers as they grow older. The absence of girl-friendly software, and the scorn of peers regarding computer 'boffs' and 'geeks' does not help matters.

Also important is our observation that boys but not girls appear more likely to treat screen-based media similarly (the more they play computer games, the more they watch television and the less they read books, for example), while girls seem to use media less *qua* technologies (for here they lack both confidence and interest, particularly as teenagers) and more as opportunities for certain social functions (associating email with the telephone or letter writing, for example). Possibly, encouraging girls to use computers might best be approached through a focus on communication (or possibly, narrative) rather than as 'IT' specifically.

If we are to learn from boys' relatively greater enthusiasm and confidence regarding computing, instead of disdaining computer games we should consider seriously the observation that it is in relation to game playing that boys talk of 'control' or 'mastery'. Perhaps it is just this experience which gives them the confidence to try out other kinds of uses of computers. If you learn about crashing programmes, mouse control, and faulty software as part of play, computers may not seem so off-putting as they do to those girls who, while motivated to use computers for school and homework, are nervous of 'breaking' the computer.

12.3.3 Social class

Content preferences

Social grade primarily makes a difference in terms of media access, not in terms of use or interests. In this it contrasts with gender (and age) as a source of inequalities. In the main, we found no significant differences between middle-class and working-class children in their preferred types of television programme, their favourite kinds of computer game or their named interests.

Access to media

Apart from the near universality of television and music, all other media in the home are stratified by social class: apart from computer games machines, nearly all media are more available to middle-class than working-class children, and this is as true for new media such as the computer, CD-Rom and Internet as for older media such as books or the telephone. (Middle-class children tend also to attend more after-school clubs and classes, so that they have both more to do, in terms of media, and less free time to do it in.) Focussing on domestic computer-based media particularly, the present findings provide ample support for concerns about the so-called 'information rich' and 'information poor' in our society.

While in equipping the home, household income is particularly important, this is not the case for provisioning the child's bedroom. Generally, age and gender are the key factors here, although the level of parental education (rather than household income) is also important. Thus some relatively poor homes may contain well-equipped bedrooms, though these tend to have more screen-entertainment media than books. Thus, having a television in the bedroom is far more common among working-class than middle-class children. The decision to provide for children in their bedroom seems to be linked to two factors: first, are parents for or against screen entertainment media and secondly do they prefer shared, or more personalised, media use within the family.

Interestingly in relation to the diffusion of the PC, we observed that while middle-class children are much more likely to have access to a computer at home, they are no more likely than working-class children to have their own PC. In a working-class family the PC is more often put in the child's bedroom, raising the interesting question of whether working-class children are being privileged or isolated in this respect.

Time use

Matching differences in media provision, middle-class children spend longer reading books, while working-class children generally spend more time on screen media (television and computer games). Interestingly, those working-class children with a PC at home use it just as much as do middle-class PC users. And similarly, while more middle-class children are readers, they do not spend longer reading than working-class readers.

Parental expectations and concerns for their children relate closely to these usage patterns: at least as seen by their children, middle-class parents appear more concerned that their children read books and do not spend 'too long' with screen-entertainment media (although importantly, when we ask parents, working-class parents do not express any less concern about their children's screen usage).

IT and social grade at school

For working-class children, school is far more likely to be the only place where they use the PC, CD-ROM and Internet, compared with middle-class children who are twice as likely to have access at home as well as in school. Hence the role of the school is vital in redressing the inequalities of IT access at home. Although it should be noted that we could not identify in detail what IT facilities exist or are used in schools, it is nevertheless noteworthy that we found few class differences in provision and use of IT in schools - in terms of frequency or type of use.

The PC-rich child - with access to a PC at home and at school - is likely to be older and middle-class, and though home access to new media may be changing rapidly, the experience with past new media would lead us to expect that middle-class homes will retain their advantage as newer IT facilities become available in the market place. In this respect it is significant that working-class parents report

relatively less confidence with computers, for themselves, and in homes with computers, working-class children are more likely to feel that they, not their parents, are the computer 'expert' at home.

12.4 THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

12.4.1 The pace of change

How much of all this is new? Are we mistaking technological change in the forms of media hardware, delivery and content for underlying social change in the family, youth and leisure? There are dangers in both overestimating and underestimating the pace and significance of the changing media environment. The market for domestic technologies is expanding, yet many aspects of children and young people's lives remain relatively constant.

Looking back to 'Television and the Child' (1958)

Comparing our initial findings with those from Himmelweit's *Television and the Child* forty years ago, we find many constancies: children preferred to watch adult programmes then as now; how much children view, then and now, tends to follow that of their parents' viewing, and parents then and now encourage their children to watch television to give parents some private time. Children then and now read very little compared with time spent on both television and music, both of which offer all-absorbing focal experiences yet can shift into the background if so preferred. Thus in the 1950s, children were not glued to the 'box in the corner': they combined television with older and more familiar media in a more complex way, as present day children are learning to do with the computer.

Social change is slow. Yet while the past four decades have been dominated by one medium, television, it is this very dominance which is now challenged by computer-based domestic entertainment media. Children and young people's lives are increasingly constructed from a diversity of media combined in different ways through space and time to generate different, albeit systematically patterned, lifestyles. Given a diversifying media environment, our key questions in this report have concerned the *mix* of media available to young people, the *match* between different young people and particular combinations of media and the *meanings* and patterns of *use* associated with different media 'styles'.

The expanding media mix

At present, this mixed media context means that new media are not occupying much more than one hour per day for most new media users, out of some five hours per day of media use. Children and young people appear to be assimilating today's new media into the structure of their everyday lives rather than radically altering their ways of living. This suggestion is in tune with the lessons from the history of previously 'new' media which emphasise that new media rarely replace or even, displace, older media. Rather, new media add to the available options, to some extent prompting new, more specialised, uses for books, television, radio, etc., resulting in an expanding media mix as both old and new media readjust their positions in young people's lives. Certainly, we can see early signs that the introduction of the PC will encourage further specialisation of both books and television.

Thus while we have found that children read no less today than they appear to have done in the days before television or the personal computer, it seems that just as television prompted new and more specialised uses for radio, so too television and newer screen media are now prompting specialisation of books. Our findings show that while books are at the most general level seen as 'boring', they remain important for a particular age group (approximately 7-10 years old), while more specialised genres are valued also at other ages (e.g. the horror genre for early teenage girls), and books remain popular at certain times of day (notably bedtime). This trend towards specialisation rather than displacement - seen over and again in the history of new media (Marvin, 1998) - means that the range of media options is multiplying not only because of the increased variety of technologies (channels, contents, forms of delivery, etc) but also because each new medium produces a multiplication and diversification in the social uses of older media, including the times and places in which media are used.

While a new medium adds to the choices available to children, it is rather older and more familiar factors which affect whether and how the medium eventually finds a place in their lives. If we

compare television - a 'transparent' technology, one which is thought of primarily in terms of *content* rather than as a *technology* or *consumer good* - with newer computer-based media, it is clear that these latter media are still early in the process of appropriation by children and families.

How this process of appropriation occurs depends on how readily new media may be incorporated into young people's pre-existing practices and priorities, namely those of social interaction, communication, narrative and play. It also depends on the transferability of pre-existing interests to the contents of new media: the importance for children and young people of sport, music, stars, drama, animals, etc - all these suggest ways of encouraging their use of newer media. And here it is particularly important to pay attention to the interests of girls, and of working-class children, if information inequalities are not to increase.

12.4.2 Lessons for the PC from the social history of the TV

Given the likelihood of future convergence of television and computer screens, we may speculate on what can be learned about the future of the computer screen from the recent social history of the television screen.

A social trajectory: from focal to casual

While not raising new technological issues, the rapid multiplication of domestic media goods is new in social terms, altering the social and regulatory environment for television use. The household in the 1950s acquired the one television set, placed it in the living room, and everyone had to negotiate with each other about how they were going to engage with that set. Similarly, when the video recorder was first introduced, it was supposed that each household might or might not buy one VCR.

Yet, households with children particularly are now acquiring multiple television sets, with two-thirds of children in our sample having their own set in their bedroom (as many as have books in their bedroom) . Multiple VCRs, multiple computers, multiple telephones, and so forth are also becoming more common. The trend for television has been to move from foreground to background, from centre of family life to a balance - struck differently in different families - between communal and individualised uses, and from the mainstay of the family evening to a round-the-clock experience, including breakfast time, daytime and night-time.

While the PC as a technology appears to assume a focussed user, there is nothing intrinsic to the screen which requires this - as the history of television shows. If the computer is to follow television, one might speculate that while currently it occupies pride of place in the family living room and is most used in the after-school period, computer use may become more casual, more individualised, and more routinely used throughout the domestic timetable.

Historical shifts

Flichy (1995) traces the social history of various media, showing how each has shifted from collective use in the family living room to a pattern of 'living together separately' under the family roof', facilitated by the new portability and cheapness of each medium as it diffuses through the market. This is now evident for the television, and may yet become apparent for the personal computer.

The present project originated with the idea of updating Himmelweit et al's *Television and the Child* to the present day. However, in view of the considerable social and economic changes which have accompanied changes in media from that time to this, it has proved more useful to situate new media within a broader historical framework in which the timeline of the diffusion of each new medium is superimposed on to the timeline of longer term sociocultural shifts towards privatised and individualised lifeworlds. Thus changes in the social construction of time, space and social relations have been easily as important to our understanding of the changing media environment for children and young people as have been specific technological innovations.

12.4.3 Individual or social uses of media?

In addition to the historical trends discussed above, the question of individual versus social uses of media can be applied cross-sectionally. One key dimension we have identified which differentiates among families is that between those families who 'live together separately', using media according

to their divergent lifestyles, and those families who are committed to sharing a common timetable and leisure pursuits, and find a place for the media within these shared activities.

'Socialising' the media

Moreover, despite the historical trend towards 'individualisation', we have also witnessed a powerful desire on the part of children and young people to 'socialise' the media, drawing them into their social life with friends instead of using them to erect boundaries or isolate themselves with the media. Given that the balance struck at any one time between social and individual leisure activities is not primarily a media-centred story but rather concerns larger social and domestic trends within which the media find their place, in this respect the computer and television as sites for social activity appear at present to be developing in opposite directions.

Despite frequent suggestions that new screen-based media are isolating children from social contacts, it is currently television - once a social medium around which the family gathered - which is increasingly watched alone. On the other hand, while the PC appears as a technology to be most appropriate for individual use, emerging domestic practices suggest more social uses: children and young people use the computer together, they talk about computers with friends, they swap games, visit those who have a new game, etc.

While this 'socialisation' of the computer appears to conflict with the longer term trend towards individualised media uses, we have also observed the same desire to 'socialise' television, albeit with less success in translating desire into practice. Distinguishing social relations with friends and with family becomes crucial. Children desire greater access to friends and the peer group, drawing the media where possible into these relations, so that even if media are not actually used together with friends, they still play a vital *social* role in peer culture. Yet at the same time, as children grow older, they desire individual and private spaces marked off from other family members, and here the media are used to mark difference rather than to maintain connection.

Balancing family and peer contexts of use

As children grow older, they have always developed from a family- to a peer-orientation. However, children of all ages are increasingly able to choose how far they wish to share their media interests with the family. At the same time, children and young people are seeking new ways of sharing their media interests with friends, raising the possibility of their being drawn ever earlier into a media culture centred on identity and consumption.

These links between media, identity and consumption also lead us to note that the opposition traditionally posed between passive media use and active face-to-face communication - implicit in the above discussion - is particularly and increasingly inappropriate for children and young people, for both the developing technologies and also the enthusiasm with which children embrace them act to undermine this opposition. Children and young people today conduct their social relations in a media-saturated environment: it is about soap opera that children gossip on the phone, they are excited by the Internet as a way of meeting others in far off places, they visit each other to share a new computer game, they hire videos to watch in a group, etc.⁵

The early signs are that 'virtual' interaction adds a valued dimension to young people's social worlds, without necessarily challenging face-to-face relationships: rather, email and the Internet add to the mix of communication modes available to young people, providing a unique opportunity to test out alternative identities or possible relationships. Yet, as with more traditional computer games, we find that young people tend to combine face-to-face and virtual communication, rather than allowing the latter to exclude the former (e.g. in the cybercafé or through email, young people either interact with those they already know, or arrange to meet face-to-face those they have got to know

⁵Not only do we need to rethink concerns which derive from the opposition between mediated and face-to-face communication, but we must also rethink the question of media effects, where these are conceived as an external intrusion into ongoing lives. Instead we must ask about mediated practices and mediated meanings, mapping the complex relations among media and the many other aspects of daily lives within which media use is inextricably embedded.

virtually).

12.4.4 New media and the dimensions of social change

As we proposed earlier, the changing media environment can be viewed with a larger lens, as part of - and as contributing to - wider social and cultural changes. Several dimensions of social change, introduced in chapter 1, shape the appropriation of new media within the lives of young people.

Public and private spaces for leisure

The multiplication of *personally owned* media may be contributing to the shifting boundary between public and private spaces in two ways. First, the boundary of '*the front door*': for rather different reasons, parents and children are dissatisfied with young people's access to public spaces and facilities (this of course may or may not represent an actual decline in provision or in safety). This frustration with public access and civic leisure facilities emerged very strongly from the research, and it may be that one key consequence is increasing levels of provision and use of media within the home.⁶

Second, the boundary of '*the bedroom door*': this multiplication of personally owned media may be facilitating the division of communal and individual or private space *within* the home, as parents find that equipping the bedroom represents an ideal compromise in which children are both entertained and kept safe.

Individualisation of lifestyles

In addition to these changes in the spatial and temporal dimensions of media use, the *diversification* of media forms and contents may also be contributing to the growing importance of individualised lifestyles. Our research demonstrated that socio-demographic factors (age, gender and social class) do not tell the whole story. Rather, leisure choices and media use are increasingly incorporated into *individualised lifestyles* which cut across these traditional categories. Dividing young people into 'traditionalists', 'screen-entertainment fans', 'specialist' media users (for books, music or the PC) and 'low' media users has provided a means of teasing out the complex relations between demographic factors and access to, and the meanings and use of, different media.

Convergence of traditionally distinct social activities or locations

Converging screen technologies may be contributing to the blurring of boundaries between traditionally distinct activities such as information, education, work and entertainment. As both work and education are increasingly brought into the home, facilitated in particular by the introduction of the PC, this cultural (as opposed to technological) convergence throws up some new areas of possible contention. At the present time, we find that the role and image of the domestic PC is under negotiation and is often seen differently by parents and children: parents generally buy a PC to benefit their children educationally, while both middle-class and working-class children mostly use the PC at home for games. Further, the meanings and practices surrounding the terms 'work', 'leisure', 'education', etc. differ according to the social background of the home. As a result, the meaning of the PC, its location in the home, its users and uses all vary accordingly.

Specifically, in middle-class homes the PC has often been acquired by parents for themselves as much as for their children, as part of a culture which prioritises books and learning over screen entertainment. Computer 'games', unless they have educational content, are seen as less acceptable. Although working-class parents also have hopes for the PC's educational potential, they are less

⁶It is beyond our scope here to chart trends in the availability of youth clubs, local cinemas and other public facilities, or in the actual or perceived safety of streets and public spaces. Clearly, the problem of mobility mediates that of public facilities, for it may be that such facilities are not being cut but rather they are becoming centralised in malls, out of town centres, etc, thereby reducing access from young people for whom mobility is a serious constraint. However, it is clear that both parents and, more strongly, children and young people consider that their options are not commensurate with their desire for access to public leisure facilities. In the balance of mediated to non-mediated leisure options, therefore, the social environment for children and young people appears to be increasingly a home-based, media-based environment.

likely to know how to use it and less likely to be able to help their child with problems. These families are also more likely to value screen entertainment and less likely to be opposed to computer games (as exemplified in the numbers with TV-linked games machines). On the other hand, working-class children are more likely to be the family computer expert, (with all that implies for self-esteem) and parents are more likely to place the only PC in their child's room (giving them greater freedom to explore the technology).

Changing modes of communication

New forms of engagement between user and medium may contribute to the gradual shift from a clear distinction between mass communication and face-to-face communication to a more diversified, participatory, active notion of mediated communication in everyday life. In the context of new media, 'interactivity' is the promised land, with a dynamic, constructive and educational dialogue with the new information and communication technology being promised. Yet, although the personal computer is now commonplace in the family home, we have found it hard to survey young people's uses of other new media such as the Internet or email, because these are still found mainly among the unrepresentative group of early adopters. And despite the much-hyped potential of new forms of interactive media, these are either barely available as yet or the interactivity offered is very limited.

Thus it seems fair to say that, despite the spectacular success of computer and video games, especially with boys, present reality does not yet match up to the dream. School computers are largely used for word-processing, few as yet have substantial experience with the Internet and those who have tend to be ambivalent about it.⁷ More interactive applications involving the *television screen* (video-on-demand, on-screen banking and tele-shopping) are not yet generally available and have had virtually no impact on today's children, except as part of futuristic fantasies. 'Interactivity' is a good selling point and as such is often over-claimed, being used to cover very different kinds of user-machine interfaces; of these, the most interactive at present, and hence for young people the most exciting, involve interaction with other people rather than with the machine.

12.5 MANAGING THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

12.5.1 Increasing complexity

When the dominant medium was television, and when everyone received the same broadcast or the same few channels, at the same time as everyone else, on their one television set, sitting with the family in the living room, it may not have seemed overly misleading to make the assumptions about 'the viewer'. Under those conditions, viewing practices within the household were easier to research methodologically as well as easier to conceptualise. And looking beyond television, researchers could specialise - on the broadcasting audience, the computer user, the newspaper reader, etc, with little need to cross into other specialisms. Over the years the situation has become ever more complex as audience research has had to take greater account of diversified lifestyles as well as of demographic variables, and of new screen-based media.

The young person growing up today lives in a mixed media environment, attending to multiple media simultaneously and often more casually than the industry would wish, yet also actively integrating media in often unanticipated ways, seeking out thematically-related contents across different media and non-media forms. As the economic and technical determinants of media systems are changing, the result is increasing asynchronicity of viewing, multiset households, plurality of channels, interactivity of media themselves and blurring of key boundaries - between producer/consumer, work/ leisure, entertainment/ information.

⁷In this context it is interesting to observe how rapidly those with Internet experience have developed a repertoire of criteria with which to evaluate the Internet. Yet as young people themselves see it, they would appreciate greater support in this respect, providing a kind of 'net-literacy' to help them move beyond what's cool to deciding what's important and what's valuable on the Internet. One group discussion among pupils (grateful for the help with their health project obtained through a drug company website) illustrates how such newly emerging critical skills are in need of further development.

We have already addressed some of the key policy concerns under the headings of 'social differences and inequalities' and 'the changing media environment', for understanding the nature of change and the inequalities or divisions which are thereby alleviated or, more worryingly, brought about, is crucial to informed policy intervention. However, given that the media environment for children and young people - and for their parents and teachers - is becoming increasingly complex, there are several further policy matters on which the findings of this report have some bearing.

12.5.2 Regulating the young

Nationally, the new media environment is less easy to regulate than before; domestically it is less easy to supervise than before. As the experience of the media, once common across the nation, becomes increasingly a diversity of experiences shared only within specific subgroups, there is increasing scope for social, psychological and cultural factors to determine who engages with which media and why. Issues of meaning, preference, identity, pleasure, conflict, lifestyle, practice and context not only become more important, but they must also be brought into the policy process.

How should children and young people's media use at home be regulated, and by whom? In the main, British parents are satisfied with the media, especially the television programmes, available for their children. Thus they worry little about their child watching television or playing computer games unsupervised in their bedroom, and they generally consider their child (though often not other people's children) to be sensible and discriminating media users.

However, from their viewpoint, the proliferation and diversification of domestic media makes regulating media use at home ever more difficult, and hence the argument that public regulation should not intrude into the privacy of the home found little support amongst parents. Ironically then, as regulation of media producers and distributors becomes increasingly complex and difficult on a national level, so that more and more expectations are being placed on parents' shoulders, it is noteworthy that parents themselves strongly wish to be able to continue to rely on the good judgement of broadcasters and media regulators.

This is especially the case because most children over eight years old prefer to watch family/adult rather than children's programming and because many parents have relatively little understanding of the computer games or Internet sites that their children make use of. Parents are generally of the view that once their children have reached their early teens, it is all but impractical for them to attempt restrictions on their media use at home, and parental control is little attempted after the age of about 14.

As television sets spread into the bedroom (being frequently watched there after the 'watershed' even by children as young as 6) for example, more liberal options such as parental mediation through conversation during co-viewing become less practicable and hence being able to rely on national regulation becomes even more important. Children's and parents' accounts often differ in relation to bedroom viewing, making it difficult to obtain a clear picture, but there may be grounds for concern regarding viewing after 9 pm in bedrooms by young children without parental mediation, whether this mediation is seen in terms of restriction or, more constructively, in terms of the shared discussion and interpretation of television contents.

Yet we observed little enthusiasm among parents for taking on themselves a more restrictive approach to their children's media use. As a strategy, parents find trying to regulate children's media use by the clock relatively impractical (hence strong support for the broadcasting 'watershed'), and while deciding where to put media within the home offers a more manageable strategy, this depends on many factors other than that of controlling children's media use.

12.5.3 A very British picture?

The importance of screen entertainment for British families

Regulating the media and information industries is no longer just a task for national regulators and industry managers. In view of our comparison between Britain and other European countries, we note that many of the findings reported here may reflect a very British picture. Given the emergence of Europe-wide regulatory practices for both the audiovisual sector and the Internet, therefore, the distinctiveness and strength of Britain's 'screen-entertainment culture' must be borne in mind.

By screen-entertainment culture, we draw on our comparative findings which show British children to be more likely than those in other European countries to have their own screen media, especially their own television set in their bedroom and to spend longer each day with screen-entertainment media in general, again especially with television; they are also the least likely to have books in their bedrooms.⁸ While historical data are lacking to allow us to determine whether this time is taken from that previously spent with books, our findings do show that the screen-entertainment media cohere together - the more time spent with video, the more spent on computer games, for example - while the same is not the case for the print media.

However, explaining why British children appear to be relatively more screen-focussed than is the case in other European countries takes us away from an account of the media *per se*. Indeed, a combination of three factors seems to be involved. First, a relative lack of things to do in the area where they live (here again, British children are far more dissatisfied in this respect than their European counterparts). Second, the relatively high level of parental fears for their children's safety outside the home. And third, the easy attractions of an increasingly personalised media environment inside the home. Other factors may also be significant: a long-established tradition of high quality public service broadcasting for children and families, for example (and a similarly long-established tradition of moral concern over the quality and nature of media contents and their possible harmful consequences for children). Yet such a tradition is under increasing pressure and so may decrease in significance with time.

Britain falling behind in IT?

It is noteworthy that British is not 'ahead' in the computer age as it has been for television. Indeed, European comparisons suggest that the UK 'leads' for screen-entertainment culture but lags behind for IT. By comparison with key European countries, children and young people in the UK have more access to, and make more use of television and computer games, but they have less access to the PC, multimedia computers and the Internet.⁹

Moreover, in the UK the differentials between lower and higher social grade households in access to both multimedia computers and the Internet appear to be much more marked than in the Scandinavian countries especially. Current Government policy is designed to address this through schools, but while schools indeed have the potential to equalise access across social groups, it remains the case that the most flexible, sociable and entertaining access to computers is through the home.

12.5.4 IT at home and at school

The issue of inequality - as discussed above - represents one of the most difficult problems for policy makers (cf. the aim of the National Grid for Learning of providing widespread access to computers and the Internet in schools and libraries by 2002). As we have seen, the availability and use of computer-based media at home is unequal, depending especially on social grade. This raises

⁸As we show in Livingstone, Holden and Bovill (in press), in the UK 50% of 6-7 year olds have a television in their bedroom, compared with 32% in Denmark, 25% in Sweden, 21% in Spain, 17% in Germany and 16% in France. The figures for video recorders and TV-linked games machines follow the same pattern. By contrast, only 68% of this age group in the UK have books other than school books, compared with 83% in Denmark, 85% in Germany, 89% in Spain, 93% in France and 94% in Sweden. Viewing figures mirror these trends, with average time spent watching television in the UK being 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.

⁹In the UK only 27% of 15-16 year-olds have access to a PC with CD-ROM at home, and similar figures are found in France (21%) and Italy (34%). But in many other countries, figures are much higher: in Denmark 63% of 15-16 year-olds have a multimedia PC at home, as do 55% in Sweden, 52% in Switzerland, 51% in Spain, 50% in Germany, 48% in the Netherlands and 47% in Finland. Moreover, in the UK 7% of 15-16 year-olds have Internet connections at home and similarly small percentages are found in Italy (12%), Spain (11%), Germany (9%), and France (5%). Access is much more common in Scandinavian countries: Sweden (38%), Finland (30%) and Denmark (26%). For further details, see Livingstone, Holden and Bovill (in press).

important questions of how to create a culture of open access and use within public locales which is attractive to all young people (see 'Excellence in Schools', HMO, July 1997).

The teaching of IT in schools is crucial if existing social divides are to be ameliorated rather than exacerbated. Although the use of IT in schools was not our primary focus, it is a strength of the present study that we could examine the relation between use of IT at home and at school for the same sample of children and young people. In some ways, we find this relationship to be an uneasy one. Fearful of compounding class inequalities, teachers are reluctant to draw on the home computer as an educational resource, leaving parents who have bought a PC to support their children's education somewhat 'out in the cold'. We also find that if pupils have up-to-date IT facilities at home, they tend to be critical of school equipment. However, in other respects our findings are encouraging: for example, children whose only access to a PC is at school report themselves as being just as excited by and confident with computers as those who also use one at home.

Teachers seem acutely aware of the difficulties of introducing IT into classrooms, though they may be enthusiastic about the potential, if not always the reality as yet, of IT in schools. Around the country, a variety of experiments with IT in schools are ongoing, and while examples of best practice will soon emerge to guide further developments, we were told of a clear wish list from teachers which stresses more and better teacher training, more technical back-up, and more money.

For young people and their families, the definitions of new technologies are still fluid: young people are uncertain whether to associate the PC with print or with screen entertainment, whether to associate the Internet with an encyclopaedia or with communication and fun. This is therefore a key moment for addressing social inequalities, and whatever adults think, it seems likely to be the latter rather than the former associations which most young people will find encouraging. After all, those who have found the communicative possibilities of the Internet, or the games potential of multimedia, are the most enthusiastic.

To take their place in the twenty first century, children must be screen-wise as well as book-wise. The screen is becoming ever more central to education, work and leisure and new kinds of interaction or engagement with screen media are becoming available. Both trends make a wide-reaching programme of media and computer education essential for the acquisition of the necessary skills.

12.5.5 Moral panics

Public debates and concerns regarding the media and young people have often lacked a grounding in a detailed account of the access and uses of new media among children and young people in Britain today. Consequently, the present report has presented findings in some detail. We have included apparently small as well as sizeable 'findings' because of the difficulties, from the vantage point of the present, in knowing which may be the key indicators of important changes to come. Further, much of the detail provided arises from our insistence on contextualising new media uses, and this insistence in turn stemmed from a concern to question or, where appropriate, rebut, the 'moral panics' which arise for today's new media just as they have done for then-new media in previous decades.

Those who worry about children and the media may take comfort from our conclusion that while media are now inextricably part of children and young people's lives, their primary concern remains with direct social interaction rather than gazing at a screen. As we have shown in various ways throughout this report, children would always rather go out, see a friend, talk to someone than they would stay in and absorb what's given to them, unless they are tired, needing time out, to relieve boredom or to fill a gap between activities.

It is important to note that despite moral panics about the media, we found very few children indeed who viewed large amounts of television to the exclusion of other activities. Nor, among those few with access to the Internet, did we encounter children upset by inappropriate materials they had found. Nor did we find children so addicted to computer games that they had become socially isolated. This is not to say that there is no need for concern. This study was conducted while broadcasting especially remains largely subject to comparatively high levels of national regulation, and it may be that some of the trends we have identified - for example, children's preference to watch television alone rather than with their family - will be more problematic if and when the broadcasting environment becomes more diversified and less regulated. The Internet is at a very early, though

rapidly escalating, point in its diffusion through British society, and a much more detailed study is required of the manner of its use by children and young people as access becomes more widespread.

However, as critics of moral panics have long argued (e.g. Drotner, 1992; Bazalgette and Buckingham 1995), it is important to recognise when societal anxieties about cultural change - often acutely experienced as anxieties about young people - are expressed as concerns about the media. Notwithstanding a public tendency to scapegoat the media, our report has found that the major distinction in children and young people's leisure time is - just as it was 40 years ago - not that between media time and non-media time, but rather that between time inside and time outside the home.

Parents' concerns are consistent with this conclusion, for we have not found parents' worries about their children's media use to be as strong as their concerns for their children's physical safety, their employment prospects or their schooling, although parents undoubtedly feel many qualms regarding the childhood they can offer their children compared to that which they themselves experienced. The differences today, compared with forty years ago, are that first, free time spent outside the home is increasingly restricted, while second, leisure time spent inside the home is ever more time spent with media, especially screen-entertainment media.

By and large, parents express some regret at this situation, but feel concern only in relation to other people's children. Children and young people express regrets regarding their freedom outside the home but only enthusiasm for the expanding media opportunities within it. In our research, we have found some grounds for concern and some for optimism; however, judging the wider consequences of the changing media environment remains more a moral than an empirical question, and one whose scope is beyond that of this report.

12.6 AFTER WORD

Despite the diversification and multiplication of media forms, for British children (and their parents) television still dominates their leisure hours and interests, being the medium which offers a far wider range of gratifications than any other. Nearly all watch television almost every or every day, television is identified most often when we ask which medium children would miss most, television is most often named when we ask what they talk about with friends, and watching television is the activity that children most often share with their parents.

Thus while we have tried to balance television in relation to other media, in this report we keep returning to the dominance of television for at present the new media occupy only a rather small proportion of some children's time and attention. A future report of this kind may look very different, as even now television is increasingly in competition with other media for young people's time. In the future, the screen itself will no longer be occupied simply by television: it already includes video, teletext and video games, and in the future it may merge with the PC, or at least acquire certain PC functions such as home shopping, the Internet, etc. Arguably, over this past forty years we have witnessed one stage of a longer term shift from a print to a visual culture, from a mass audience to a more segmented audience, from an accepting to a more critical and interactive audience. However, given the poor record of past futurologists, we will not engage in further crystal ball gazing here.

The present project began with the premise that a systematic and broad-ranging description was needed of the 'changing media environment' for children and young people. We suggest that contextualising new media use in relation to other media and leisure activities serves to diffuse public anxieties about addicted or isolated children. More broadly, as will have become clear over the preceding chapters, the findings in this report touch on policy debates from a wide range of fields encompassing domestic broadcasting regulation, education for information technology in schools, consumer demand for new media goods, national versus European or even global flows of media contents, concerns over the family, lifestyle or other segmentations of common culture, inequalities in social and technological competence and children's versus parental rights.

We hope that those with particular academic or policy interests can focus on the relevant sections of this report to discover the findings or arguments pertinent to their questions. Understanding social change and informing debate is a valuable and ambitious goal, for the more social science keeps pace

with technological change, the better the chances for influencing, both directly or more likely indirectly, the conditions of their shaping, regulation and use. As a further aim of the project was to provide a baseline against which future changes may be measured, it may be that some policy implications will only emerge in the years to come.