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Anthea Henderson

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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# **Family as mediation – a Caribbean perspective**

Anthea Henderson

## **Abstract**

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In discussions about children’s use of media, and particularly the risks associated with their engagement with media, the role of parental mediation becomes important. For very young children, decisions regarding what kinds of digital gadgets, platforms or content, and when or where they may be accessed, rest with the parents. However, in the Caribbean, where households often include family members spanning several generations, the management of children’s use of media of necessity takes a different form. This paper advances the view that conceptualizing ‘the family’ as a significant aspect of the mediation process is intrinsic to understanding and researching this phenomenon in the Caribbean region. The family-as-mediation idea is explored by reviewing literature that intersects family demographics with mediation, by discussing the importance of parenting styles, and in relation to sociocultural norms of the Caribbean family. I conclude by positing that family mediation of children’s engagement with media tools may be as much an outcome as strategy, and argue that research is needed in the region to better understand the dynamics in households that are becoming increasingly media rich.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Particularly for households with young children, decisions regarding which media – hardware, services and content – are brought into the home, and when, rest with parents. Decisions regarding the location of media artefacts or devices in the home may also be parentally determined, and early impressions about media are influenced by parental values and preferences, although peer influences are an important consideration as children mature. Concerns about the nefarious effects of media on young people, and interest in exploiting the benefits of digital technologies, have occupied the attentions of academics, policymakers, advocates and of course, parents. These realities have authenticated the interest in studies which look at parental mediation of children's media use.

Perhaps of less focus has been the attention to family as a context for inquiry, although some notable examples do exist (see Padilla-Walker, Coyne and Fraser, 2012; Gentile and Walsh, 2002). Family as context offers some fruitful potential for study for a number of reasons - interactions between parents and children regarding media experiences are dynamic and complex, often including discussions which transcend 'mediation' as point of departure, family demographics have been empirically shown to be a significant variable in determining media acquisition and practices (Nikken and Jansz, 2006; Clark, 2011; Kundanis, 2003; Livingstone, 2002), family types may offer windows of opportunity for targeted mediation strategies (Wint and Brown, 2001), and families provide the environment in which values of identity, belonging and competence may be nurtured - all essential attributes for digital literacies (Ellison, 2003; Livingstone, 2002). Family is also the context in which ideologies and practices of democracy are nurtured, with adoption - and mastery - of digital tools playing a significant role, especially for younger members of the family (Hartmann, Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2007). The case of the Caribbean is of particular interest in this discussion, given the advanced development of the digital media environment in some countries, and the need for state-society collaborations in regional regulation efforts. Moreover, the Caribbean has been an important site for discourse regarding the non-universality of the nuclear family (Barrow, 2001; Haralambos and Holborn, 1995). Indeed, some state-funded campaigns in the region target a notion of 'family' for parental mediation strategies (see [www.broadcastingcommission.org](http://www.broadcastingcommission.org) for an example), providing an opportunity for discussion regarding the kinds of messaging that might best work for families of various demographics and subcultures within the society.

Ironically, 'family' may be perceived as the missing element in some lay discussions about children and media use. This researcher was met with howls of dismay when she, quite recently, asked third year media students to conduct some ethnographic research with families of young children. The general consensus, though not necessarily scientific, was that it would be hard to find 'families'. Using the Caribbean island of Jamaica as a context, this paper aims to make explicit what is often an understated, and sometimes an *unstated* reality, that the institution of the family per se, regardless of its configuration, is a significant shaper of mediation processes within the home. There are a number of ways in which I propose that this is so: in terms of the demographics of the family, in terms of parenting styles generally, and in relation to sociocultural norms of the family, which may be linked to ongoing patterns of interaction that span generations. Through an analysis of existing literature – particularly three studies conducted in the Caribbean - I posit that in respect of the mediation of exposure to tools of digital media, the family factor may actually constitute more than the sum of its parts. The paper advances the view that conceptualizing family as a significant aspect of the mediation process is intrinsic to understanding and researching this phenomenon in the Caribbean region.

## **A DIGITAL WORLD**

Digitization of media tools has led to an era in which the access to and use of mobile, individual, affordable technologies is unprecedented. This allows young people – for whom media is the key cultural resource (Mastronardi, 2003) – more technology and content options than has ever been possible. Many still continue to enjoy content through traditional means of delivery such as television and radio (Rideout, et al., 2010; Livingstone, 2002; Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica, 2012), but as mobile media like cell phones, laptops and tablets, as well as gaming devices, become more accessible financially, they provide ever expanding opportunities for online interaction, education and entertainment. Youth are also spending more *concentrated time* with media and because much of that time is spent using multiple media simultaneously, the hours of content they are exposed to is actually much higher than may be immediately evident (Rideout, et al., 2010). Forbes' ethnography of social media outlines similar shifts in the Caribbean (Forbes, 2012). Like other artefacts in the culture, digital tools themselves become markers of status (Bourdieu, 1984), defining the owners – particularly young people for whom identity formation is linked to possession of technological gadgets - in terms of affluence and taste (Buckingham, 2008; Carroll et al., 2001). These affordances provide fillip to the increase of digital technologies in the home,

and facilitate what Livingstone and Bober (2004) refer to as the “diversification of tastes and habits at home which frees young people from following the lifestyle decisions of their parents” (p. 134).

Together, these factors make it imperative to review the older notions of the role of media in family life, as they can now play an integrative and educational function within the family (Clark, 2011), and can be inscribed usefully into family practices that are unique to the household (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). However new media also present with influences not unconnected to their enhanced interactivity, miniaturization, and mobility and the effects of this media-rich environment are not always positive. For parents with young children, the concern is that children may be exposed to content or persons that are inappropriate for them at that age, with an additional challenge that mobile media use is harder for parents to monitor (Nikken and Jansz, 2006; Henderson, 2013). Media, it is argued, contribute to a range of issues such as loneliness, addiction, low levels of contentment, poor academic performance and aggression, among others (Appel, et al., 2012; Rideout, et al., 2010; Linder and Werner, 2012). Furthermore, there is also a cultural transition towards individualism in Western societies (Livingstone, 2002) exemplified by the pervasiveness of personally owned digital media, sometimes leading to a dispersing quality as regards interactions within the home. These shifts are occurring in developing societies as well with the increasing availability of information technologies, leading to a global cultural ethos (Brown, 1995; Henderson, 1998).

## **THE CARIBBEAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT**

In Latin America and the Caribbean, studies have been conducted to explore the breadth and use of digital technologies, with an interest in outlining how issues of broadband access influence economic development and civic engagement (DIRSI, 2014; Dunn, 2012). The Caribbean region’s information and communication technology (ICT) environment is almost fully liberalized, with several entities providing a range of free-to-air broadcasting, telecommunications and broadband services (Dunn, et al., 2012; Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica, 2012). In Jamaica, significant numbers of the population enjoy television, radio and mobile phone services (84%, 88% and 92% respectively), although internet use and access to computers is less widespread (15% and 24% respectively) (Dunn, 2012). Research indicates that engagement with newer forms of technology is dynamic in the region; Miller and Slater’s (2000) ethnographic study of the use of the Internet by Trinidadians

demonstrates a robust adoption of the medium in ways that enact their cultural and national practices. Forbes' (2012) qualitative research among social media users in Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago and the US unearths the contours of youth culture mediated by platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

The focus of contemporary Caribbean media and ICT discourse is itself an indication of the rapid development of the sectors over the last thirty years. Earlier discussions concentrated on issues of north-south information flow, media imperialism and cultural dependencies (Lent, 1977; Dunn, 1995; Nettleford, 2003; Brown, 1995; Henderson, 1998). Those concerns continue to be relevant, particularly given the commercial environment in which media businesses operate (for two reviews of the Jamaican situation see Gordon, 2008; Henderson, 2008). With the broadcast media, telecommunications and Internet services landscape almost fully liberalized regionally, current discussions tend to centre on expanding and augmenting digital access for deeper engagement in commerce, education and civic affairs (Dunn, Thomas and Brown, 2012; Thakur, 2012), as well as reflecting on the gains of local cultural industries in recent decades (Mock Yen, 2002; White and Rowe, forthcoming).

However, research which explores the ways in which the liberalized digital media environment has transformed use in the context of the home has not been sufficiently examined in the region. The digital environment calls for new approaches towards parenting, so that the management and monitoring of the use of these tools, particularly in the context of the home, can take place in a way that provides young people with useful engagement without the concomitant dangers. This is why parental mediation is important.

## **PARENTAL MEDIATION**

The term 'parental mediation' has been in use since the 1970s and 80s (Clark, 2011). Nikken and Jansz (2006) define mediation as the range of interactions that parents have with their children in relation to their media use. Citing Austin et al (1999), Kundanis (2003) describes mediation as the term for active discussion of media texts. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) define parental mediation as pertaining to "parental management of the relation between children and media", noting that those interactions transcend restrictions that parents may impose, and also include discussion and approaches towards evaluation and monitoring of content (p. 581). In this latter perspective, mediation is seen as an intentional activity in which parents exercise authority over the child/media interaction in ways that inculcate and

transmit larger values of media preference. Surveying the early literature Clark (2011) summarizes the term as pertaining to the "active role in managing and regulating their children's experiences with television" (p. 323), thus putting into the foreground the medium for which early studies and theorizing became necessary.

Mediation is often discussed in relation to specific techniques or strategies of oversight that parents may employ to protect children from nefarious effects of media exposure, such as engaging with media along with children, disallowing certain kinds of media engagement, using filters and blocks to censor programming content, and surveillance (Kundanis, 2003; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008). Studies have indicated that parental guidance can play a significant role in modulating the potentially harmful aspects of certain kinds of media content. For example, one study has found that for children who watch particular kinds of aggressive content on television and in movies, high levels of parental monitoring has a significant bearing on whether children will approve of those aggressive behaviours themselves (Linder and Werner, 2012). On the other hand, parents whose engagement with media is low or non-existent tend to have children whose risks of exposure are higher, as discovered regarding exposure to television, as well as the use of the Internet (Nathanson, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2008). These findings suggest that parental mediation is essential, if children are to engage in media in responsible, meaningful and empowering ways. But all mediation strategies are not the same, and the literature specifies types of parental intervention in children's media use, with some being more effective for children of particular ages, or for kinds of media (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008; Kundanis, 2003; Nathanson, 1999). Citing Nathanson and Cantor (2000), Kundanis (2003) identifies three distinct approaches towards parental mediation – active, in which parents talk about media, restrictive, in which parents set rules about media engagement, and covieing, for practices of shared, simultaneous media use. She makes the point that although active mediation is associated with the development of strong media literacies in children, restrictive mediation is only effective if it isn't overused (Kundanis, 2003). Others propose that the platform of the Internet – due to its ability to facilitate varied kinds of interactivity – requires different classifications of mediation, such as active co-use, interaction restrictions, technical restrictions and monitoring (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008).

Studies have unearthed a number of demographically related factors of mediation. The configuration of the household (in terms of gender, age and ethnicity) plays a role in the kinds of mediation that may be used when children are accessing the Internet and other media (Nikken and Jansz, 2006; Clark, 2011; Kundanis, 2003). For example, in the West,



when there are children in the household, there is more likely to be Internet use, as well as access to Internet in the home (Eynon and Helsper, 2015; Livingstone and Bober, 2004). But age of children is a significant variable; Eynon and Helsper (2015) note that having younger children in the home has no significant bearing on whether adults in the household access or use the Internet, although having adolescents *does*. One study shows that media exposure (meaning engagement with television, music, videogaming, computers and print) of youngsters is significantly influenced by race and ethnicity, with African-Americans and Hispanic youth engaging in more media exposure than Whites (Rideout, et al., 2010). In their study, Rideout, et al. (2010) state 30% of their respondents age 15-18 indicated that they don't have any rules imposed on them regarding their media use. This finding is connected to the practice parents have for lessening their control on media use as children get older; it is known that restrictive mediation is not as effective in managing teenagers' media use as is active mediation (Appel, et al., 2012). Child related attributes such as age, gender and online skills are significant factors in determining risk for children who are users of the Internet (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008). The education level of parents is also a factor; in the US parents with a college degree or higher impose greater restrictions on children's engagement with most media, although findings regarding the mediation of print go in the other direction (Rideout, et al., 2010).

A preliminary study carried out in Jamaica indicates that parents are using a number of techniques including monitoring, controlling and restrictions<sup>1</sup> to manage their children's use of media (Henderson, 2013). In the study, which was an exploratory qualitative investigation of parents' mediation approaches conducted among participants in the capital city, Kingston, some parents acknowledged that the responsibility of mediating their children's engagement with media was complex, frustrating and sometimes even futile; minors often knew (better than their parents) how to circumvent technical blocks, and where to go for 'censored' content when away from the home (where parental mediation usually takes place). Nevertheless, Jamaican parents are also displaying an appreciation for the need to facilitate children's right to information while at the same time protecting minors from content that will harm them (Henderson, 2013). As one father said, if people are going to have children,

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<sup>1</sup> Controlling activities included subscribing to family-friendly cable packages, blocking adult channels, and enjoying adult content when children are not around. Monitoring activities involved keeping surveillance of what minors were watching during viewing times. Restrictions involved disallowing certain kinds of programmes from being watched, or refusing to buy certain kinds of gadgets. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

then they must not allow them to “roam the Internet and do what they want to do”, as that kind of neglect would be the same as sending them on the streets to fend for themselves.

Clark (2011) points out that there is a correspondence between the findings about *mediation* – active and restrictive – and interpersonal theories of communication, suggesting that the broader context in which family dialogue occurs may be linked in approach and outcome to narrower concerns about mediation. How members of family relate *routinely*, is connected to how they approach the values and rules regarding media use. For example, Padilla-Walker, et al. (2012) remind us that parents and teens often use media together, as a consequence of the daily practices within the home. The converse is also true: Linder and Werner (2012) suggest that parent-child discussions about media may not immediately affect children’s broader relational norms, but over time, these discussions may be integrated into the children’s developing normative frameworks. Additionally, the study by Appel, et al. (2012) suggests that parental communication regarding particular media – in this case the Internet use – is an important indicator of whether adolescent online engagement will be satisfying.

Perspectives vary on the matter of the impact of digital media on the institution of family. There are concerns about the pervasive, multimodal, “always-on” quality of contemporary digital media, and the changes in media habits that are being unleashed, particularly on young people, as well as issues with exposure to violent and graphic sexual content, and the perceived and real threats to parental authority that digital tools can contribute to (Azzam, 2006; Rideout, et al., 2010; Clark, 2011). Importantly, research seems to refute the idea that increased mediation of children's use of the Internet will necessarily lower their exposure to online danger (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008). However a broader picture of the impact of media on the family must also consider the productive ways in which media is included in the process of “being and doing” family. For example, research by Gentile and Walsh (2002) shows that families that tend to pursue positive media habits in clusters – taken together, their strategies of mediation will lend themselves to favourable outcomes. There is also a view that online time has not necessary taken the place of family time (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). With the popularity of co-viewing for television mediation (Kundanis 2003), and co-use for Internet monitoring (Livingstone and Helsper, 2008) engagement with media may still be a family event in many households, particularly for those with young children.

In the Caribbean, as with other places, parental mediation occurs as a function of everyday practices within the home, but the mediation approaches can vary significantly depending on

a number of factors. The paper now contextualizes the region, and explores the sociocultural landscape in which broadcast media liberalization occurred in the early 1990s. In the next two sections, particular mention is made of the Jamaican experience, because in important ways, the social fabric of the country mirrors what occurs in other Caribbean territories (Alleyne, 2005). Additionally, Jamaica has enjoyed an advanced media environment in recent decades, and although there are gaps in the research, preliminary studies that have been done provide a starting point for this discussion.

## **THE CARIBBEAN**

The Caribbean is often thought of as the idyllic island chain in the Caribbean Sea, and in this paper I concentrate on this somewhat restrictive framework, which incorporates the Lesser Antilles such as Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the east, and Greater Antilles including Puerto Rico, Hispaniola and Jamaica in the west. The Caribbean islands have experienced British, French, Spanish and Dutch influences through the colonial period which, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lasted approximately three hundred years. But Girvan (2000) makes the point that there are several possible notions for the term ‘Caribbean’, including one that emphasizes the intersecting history, culture and ethnicities of the wider area of coastal groups in South and Central America, and another which speaks to the overseas community of Caribbean people in the diaspora.

### **Social History – a review**

The social landscape of the islands of the Caribbean is markedly influenced by the shared history of its sugar-plantation genesis, and by extension its slave-society beginnings (Girvan, 2000). It was on the basis of the expansion of a largely mono-culture economic enterprise in sugar production that various groups of people arrived – a European minority planter class voluntarily, European and Middle Eastern (and later Asian) immigrants for the new opportunities offered by emergent economies, and black African slave classes by force (Beckford, 2001; Stone, 2001). From its earliest beginnings, Caribbean society was stratified by race, and racial origin was connected to economic prospects and political rights. These distinctions were later formalized into class hierarchies which, in turn, reinforced the differences between social groups. According to Alleyne (2005), the “primordial divisions which were established in post-Columbian Caribbean societies, and which corresponded to master, his (freed) offspring of mixed blood, and his slave” (p. 193-4) transitioned into

socioeconomic brackets of upper, middle and working/peasant class and are still found in various permutations across the entire region.

The literature varies in perspective on the nature and implications of Caribbean societal formation, with some writers, such as Sherlock and Bennett (1998), emphasizing the oppressive, dysfunctional, alienating features of emerging societies, which speak to the Caribbean's "split social heritage" (p. 390), and Beckford (2001), who describes Caribbean society as retaining features – such as rigid stratification and political organization – that originated in the plantation era. On the other hand, sociologists like Smith (2001) have argued that Caribbean societies are pluralistic configurations, in that people of varied ethnicities live together in shared geographical spaces, but remain distinct, thus emphasizing the capacities of discrete groups to stay intact ethnically and culturally, while living in a context of diversity. Smith's perspective had suggested that there is less "melting" – or *creolization* (Brathwaite, 2001) - in the proverbial melting pot than had usually been assumed. However the plural society thesis has been sharply dismissed as simplistic and unrepresentative of the complexity of the Caribbean situation.<sup>2</sup>

These theoretical distinctions may seem arcane to intellectual outsiders, and I would argue that Caribbean society exemplifies aspects of each of these features. However, the germane point is that the role of race in societal formation is understood in different and sometimes contradictory ways by Caribbean thinkers. Yet it is this term - race - which Smith (2004) advances is implicit in any discussion of family life. The intersection between race and family structure is explored below.

Along with the question of race is the sociological question. The reality is that across the region, the descendants of the original slaves have by and large continued to experience more extreme forms of poverty, more persistent dependence on the state for education and health benefits, and fewer opportunities for social or economic mobility (Alleyne, 2005; Beckford, 2001; Narcisse, 2000; Stone, 2001). Political independence has not always delivered on the promise of improvement for the masses; democracy has often been exploited by an indigenous ruling class in order to maintain dependencies among the lower classes (Gray, 2004; Munroe, 2000). However, countries whose economies have diversified through the development of sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, finance and petroleum have begun

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive review of this discussion, see Smith (2004) and Chevannes (2000).

to provide labour opportunities for skilled, highly skilled and managerial-level workers, which has allowed for more nuanced stratification, and less rigid class divisions, than were common forty or fifty years ago (Stone 2001; Alleyne, 2005).

Arising from the flows of these economic and social developments, a Caribbean “ethos” definitely exists (Nettleford, 2004). As Miller and Slater (2000) note as regards “being Trini”, a regional identity cannot be pinpointed as having a particular monolithic expression. There are any number of practices, perspectives and values which in cluster or part represent aspects of what it means to be Caribbean, and which are embraced, enacted and even rejected, depending on the circumstance (Alleyne, 2005; Nettleford, 2004). Notwithstanding, within discrete societies (with Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and Barbados as examples) there remain some communities that retain sufficient difference in respect of ethnicity, social class, lifestyle, and even vocation to research them as such. Along these lines, investigating the Caribbean family becomes important. And importantly, from Smith’s (2004) perspective, in any discussion of the Caribbean family, the race issue becomes a major theme.

### **The Caribbean ‘Family’**

In many modern families, finding the 'family' either as a unit of analysis in research, or as a discursive construct, has become a complicated endeavour. Some have observed that many studies that investigate children’s media use in the context of the home do not directly use family as a variable, or if they do, they collapse home, family and household to mean the same thing in research (Padilla-Walker, et al., 2012; Livingstone, 2002). In the account given above, my students were eventually able to find groups of relatives, including parent-child groupings, for each major socioeconomic bracket of the area under review in or around the urban center of Jamaica’s capital, Kingston. But their success was preceded by anxious moments, and even as they processed data, there was a sense that perhaps this or that group did not adequately reflect the category.

The Caribbean as a region offers some additional complexities in any discussion of family, and by extension, parental mediation. In the Caribbean, family and household are definitely not identical. Caribbean family studies have tended to investigate the household, rather than the relational dynamics within the home (Moses, 2001). Also, research in the region has tended to concentrate on the Afro-Caribbean, working class family, and Barrow (2001) and Chevannes (2000) argue that this preoccupation has generated a largely judgmental and misunderstood account of family life in the region. More recent Caribbean sociology

describes family structures which vary significantly on the basis of ethnicity, class and wealth (Barrow, 2001). Low-income families in the Caribbean are usually of African descent, are often female headed, and are associated with particular challenges associated with poverty and disempowerment (Wint and Brown, 2001; Massiah, 1983). In the Caribbean kinship networks that span more than one household, and are often matriarchal (but not always) is a common feature of family structure (Barrow, 2001). Grandmothers, aunts and multiple siblings - sometimes with their own children – share space in the household, particularly in lower and working class communities. Responsibility for parenting children is often shared across generations – with mothers and grandmothers playing combined roles – in these settings.

The roles and responsibilities assumed by individuals in these communities can be understood from a family systems perspective (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2000). A family systems approach posits that there are patterns of interaction within families, and that they develop and are sustained on a multigenerational basis (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2000; Broderick, 1993). This frame of reference is useful when applied to the Caribbean context, as it provides an opening to acknowledge the implications of societal formation in post-slave and postcolonial settings. Importantly, it is usually the Afro-Caribbean class of the society that policy makers *and* academicians target in discussions regarding ‘repairing the family’ (Wint and Brown, 2001; Samms-Vaughan, et al., 2005). Interventions have often sought to train parents of the inner-city to assist them in becoming ‘more effective’ in their parenting behaviours (Wint and Brown, 2001), and to replace oppressive, authoritarian parenting styles identified in Baumrind (1971) with approaches that are more affirming of children as they develop.

Caribbean people of Indian descent have tended to retain family patterns which largely mirror the practices on the Asian subcontinent, including marriage and kinship traditions, although with some adjustments (Nevadomsky, 2001; Mohammed, 2001). In societies like Trinidad and Tobago this phenomenon is expressed in markedly different cultural values and norms within the family, depending on whether the analysis is of Afro-Caribbean or Indian families. There is also in the Caribbean the minority races of European and Middle-Eastern descent, who tend to represent the contemporary ruling elite in the region, and to some degree have maintained both class and affluence distinctions in most Caribbean countries (Austin-Broos, 2001; Stone 2001).

These clusters of social groupings across the region sometimes share, and sometimes distinguish between, the various notions of family, which are necessarily articulated to unique histories, cultures, practices and statuses in the emerging societies.

A few points arise out of this. First, in the Caribbean, household and family are definitely *not* homogenous in character, as family members may reside across several households, and often, several generations may reside in a single household. Second, normative family is often associated with family patterns which are deemed to belong to the status-endowed classes, although not without contestation (Smith, 2004). Third, it is into this dynamic, pulsating, conflicted social context that a liberated, media environment has been thrust, providing previously inaccessible platforms of interactivity within and between social groups, and at the same time accentuating earlier class and wealth differentials on the basis of purchasing power of new media tools. And importantly, the access to and engagement with existing and new forms of media provides a fresh set of perspectives from which to understand race, class and family for Caribbean people.

Family as context is a useful perspective to study parental mediation. Although families tend to think of themselves in normative terms (Livingstone, 2002) it would be useful to determine whether this is the case in the Caribbean, and whether views vary based on ethnicity, class or family structure. Additionally, for the purposes of this topic, how do different Caribbean families view or exercise appropriate parental mediation in an environment of expanding digital media options? Working class parents are known for practicing a restrictive and sometimes severe form of discipline (Samms-Vaughan, et al., 2005; Arnold, 1982); research is needed in order to assess whether these traditional approaches persist, and in what ways they influence mediation of digital tools in the home.

One middle-class Jamaican mother broached the matter of parental oversight with her just-turned teenage daughter, Missy, who had been begging to be allowed on Facebook for years. The discussion between the two family members illustrated the dilemmas of mediation in the current environment, but also seemed to suggest a savviness and camaraderie – on the part of both parent and child – that may not be representative across all social groups:

**Sandy:** Now that you have met the minimum age requirement, you may open a FaceBook account. The #1 rule is that you must friend your father and me, and I must have your password

**Missy:** Oh yes! Friending daddy will definitely "up my cool!"

**Sandy (to herself):** Hmmmmm. I guess that makes me chopped liver.

## **FINDINGS FROM REGIONAL RESEARCH**

An exploratory, preliminary investigation conducted in Jamaica was done using focus groups of parents from the Kingston and St Andrew areas to find out the answers to two questions:

1. What drives your media programming choices?
2. How do you monitor what your children are watching or listening to (Henderson, 2013)?

Five focus groups were conducted – three at various locations on the campus of a leading university in the capital city, and two in nearby working class, residential communities. Each focus group session had between five and six participants, with a parent (either mother or father) in attendance. The parents had between one and four children.

From the study it was evident that Jamaican households have a range of information devices including televisions, laptops, personal computers, video-games consoles, landline and mobile phones, and tablets. This finding corroborates with nationally representative research which indicates a diverse ownership of media tools (Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica, 2012). However, subscription to cable television channels varied significantly, with some parents having foreign channels, and others not.

During the focus group sessions, the discussions surrounding the question: “how do you monitor what your children are watching and listening to?” generated the most robust involvement from the parents of each group. Although they were able to articulate perspectives regarding their own media choices and preferences, participants in each group were most engaged with matters related to *parenting*, and how to manage their parenting role in the digital age. This suggests that the topic itself was salient to them.



Based on the discussions, several strategies of mediation were being used by the parents. These were not mutually exclusive categories, but rather a variety of measures on a continuum, from intermittent and easy-going approaches, to rigid and less flexible practices. Broadly their approaches involved combinations of the following:

- *Monitoring*: parents talked about being vigilant and attentive regarding the kinds of content their children were being exposed to. Sometimes this had to do with placing the screen in a location within sight of the parent, ensuring that the children's recreational viewing was occurring during the band designated for them, and a range of other surveillance related measures.
- *Controlling*: some parents used technological blocks and filters to eliminate their children's exposure to offensive content. For example, one parent's ingenuity had her turning off the generator at nights, deliberately knocking out electricity flow into the home, and her teenager's access to late-night TV viewing.
- *Restricting*: some parents disallowed certain kinds of media exposure by establishing family rules about content or the use of gadgets. A father talked about refusing to buy his son a mobile phone, because he didn't have one when he was a child.

However parents in one focus group made it clear that they didn't think restrictive mediation, by itself, was an effective method of guiding children's use of media. Some emphasized the importance of having informal discussions with their children about life generally, rather than censoring their access to digital tools or content (Henderson, 2013).

Importantly, participants in the focus groups were not of the view that more media was necessarily better; some parents stressed the need for a more balanced flow of foreign media content, arguing that the kinds of "old-time" local programmes they used to enjoy years ago needed to be brought back. Choice, as represented by widely available cable television, and access to digital gadgets, had unleashed a kind of "cultural crisis".

A second study of interest is an ethnographic investigation into the use of social media, which provides a look into the role of media in the lives of young people in Jamaica, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the US (Forbes, 2012). The study focuses on youth use of digital media such as mobile phones to access popular sites like Facebook and Twitter. The findings are useful in demonstrating how social media have become inscribed into the day-to-day routines of Caribbean young people – for studies, recreation, self-definition, and

dating. However, Forbes' (2012) research also indicates some patterns of adolescent online engagement that reflect socio-demographic variables. Whereas male teenagers from the Jamaican inner-city tended to use social media as a platform to attract the opposite sex, boys from the upper classes seemed to combine social media interactions into a number of other Internet-driven activities, including research for school, or gaming. The early indication is that socio-demographic characteristics within the home appear to influence children's mobile media use, at least in some ways (Forbes, 2012, Henderson, 2013<sup>3</sup>). Nevertheless, media practices among young people also reflect new forms of communication and interaction due to the increasingly mobile and individual nature of digital media tools, and Forbes (2012) makes the point that some kinds of behavior, such as online "tracing"<sup>4</sup> sessions, were indulged in by young people across all social strata.

Miller and Slater's (2000) observation regarding the adoption of Internet in Trinidad is germane in respect of the impact and interaction with media generally, and the way in which various tools are incorporated into daily use: media have been embraced in the Caribbean as a set of new 'alignments' requiring integrations in terms of life as it is usually lived. What remains is the setting of a research agenda which explores aspects of these new alignments, particularly in the ways in which those processes have influenced the activities within families and homes.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

It has already been established that parental mediation of tools and content is related to demographics such as gender, age and ethnicity (Nikken and Jansz, 2006; Clark, 2011; Kundanis, 2003). Existing literature sheds light on the different outcomes that occur for various kinds of parenting, and various types of mediation (Wint and Brown, 2001; Gentile and Walsh, 2002). The Caribbean provides an interesting case for further study, given the varieties of family structures that exist across the region, as well as the rapid uptake in digital media among some sections of society. A key interest is to locate – or "find" - the Caribbean

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<sup>3</sup> Since 2012, third year CARIMAC students in the Media and Children course have been engaged in qualitative investigations within the Kingston corporate area to find out how parents monitor their children's engagement with media. Parents of inner city communities are usually less discriminating of their children's choice of media, as well as the time spent with media, than parents from middle or upper class communities.

<sup>4</sup> Forbes describes the very common Jamaican practice of "tracing" as 'to quarrel in an undignified manner, usually with expletives included' (p. 10).

family (with its diversities) in the context of media use and practice, and elaborate other areas for investigation from there. In this paper I propose two distinct aspects of investigation. The first relates to the need for ongoing state-society collaboration in media regulation efforts, requiring an augmenting of the knowledge available about media use in the family, since various kinds of regulatory messaging might be necessary to account for the different demographics and parenting approaches in the society. This need seems to be underscored by Jamaican parents themselves, who have asked for more intervention from the broadcast regulator in focus group sessions (Henderson, 2013). Research priorities would involve the following question and sub-questions:

- In what ways is the Caribbean family a significant shaper of mediation processes within the home? In particular:
  - o To what extent are family demographics a factor in parental mediation in the Caribbean?
  - o How do parenting styles influence parental mediation in the Caribbean?

The second research priority is guided by the need for more robust conceptualizing of the Caribbean family – with its diverse forms – in an era of expanding digital media access and use. Underlying this research focus is the acknowledgement that notions of race, ethnicity and class are implicit in investigations about the Caribbean family (Smith, 2004). The perspectives, practices and values which in cluster or part are linked to ethnic and class-related diversities are likely to influence patterns of media use and management, and probably persist over generations (Padilla-Walker and Coyne, 2012; Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2000). Ideas about “who we are as family” are vitally connected to assumptions about “what we do as family”; practices of mediation would be articulated to these considerations. Questions that would be included are:

- o Do Caribbean families think of themselves in normative terms?
- o What kinds of cultural values influence parental mediation in the Caribbean?
- o To what extent does family system influence parental mediation in the Caribbean?

It is within the context of the *family* as a construct that identity – clustered around perspectives of value, worth, preference – is constructed. Hoover, et al. (2004) speak frontally to this by focusing on the intersection of parenting and media as a *process of negotiating a shared identity*. As they make clear, any discussion about the home and media

is implicitly a discussion about “what family means”, and “who we are”. By consequence, several notions of “what ought to be (*allowed*)” and “what ought not to be (*allowed*)” become significant.

## CONCLUSIONS

Family is the institution responsible for nurturing youngsters and reproducing society’s values, which makes it simultaneously a site of high expectations and anxieties (Livingstone, 2002; Buckingham, 2000). In this sense, most parents face a common responsibility and a common fear in the digital era. However, with perspectives such as family system theory, which posits that the forms of interaction, routines, priorities and values of the family are dynamic, recurrent and reinforcing (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2000), it can be argued that different families will experience and respond to the digital environment differently, and with different outcomes. In this paper it is argued that already-existing research foregrounds the influence that demographic factors have on mediation practices, requiring a further investigation within the Caribbean. Further study is needed to explore the contours of family relationships in the Caribbean, and to show how mediation practices are exercised in the regional context, since the parent-child dyad is just one of the ways in which mediatory practices are enacted in multi-generational households.

In this paper I posit – guardedly at this point - that family *is* mediation. Through daily interactions, routines and most importantly *relationships*, family enacts and reproduces its values, which include ideas and practices around media engagement and use. It is through relationships that approaches of mediation are devised, implemented, contested and embraced.

Some media appear to foster deeper levels of connection between family members than others (Padilla-Walker, et al., 2012). This may lead some to argue that mediation should be undertaken in particular ways, on the basis of the peculiarities of the device. However, this approach does not appear to be useful going forward given the trends of mobile media. Mediation can no longer be successful as a device-by-device concept. It must be conceptualized and enacted at a deeper level. Indeed, Padilla-Walker, et al., (2012) admit that they cannot be dogmatic about the direction of effects in their study, which explored the correlation between family media use and family connection. They argue, as do others (for example Clark 2011), that a family that is already experiencing robust, dynamic, integrative

relationships between members will incorporate media into those already-existing patterns of interaction. This suggests that the dilemma about mediation may actually be a dilemma about something else.

Of note, is that family as mediation may in part be a 'mediation as outcome' idea, as much as it is 'mediation as strategy', as it is through the natural processes of being family that forms of mediation take place. This notion provides an occasion both for review of the state of family in the Caribbean region, as well as a platform for investigating through research, the ways in which particular strategies of mediation may be more effectively incorporated into existing family systems.

### **Acknowledgments:**

The author wishes to acknowledge Sonia Livingstone and Bart Cammaerts, both of the Department of Media and Communication, LSE, for their helpful recommendations as she worked on earlier drafts of this paper. She is also grateful to Elsa Leo-Rhynie and Joan Thomas, colleagues at The University of the West Indies, Mona, for their review of the paper during its final stages. She also thanks the CARIMAC/UWI team and specially, her family, for their willing support while she attended the research fellowship at LSE.

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**ISSN:** 1474-1938/1946