

## **Children's Media: More harm than good?**

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### **Changing media, changing childhood**

When I was a child growing up, families had one television with three channels, the phone was in a hallway or street corner, bedrooms were cold and forbidden in the day time, living rooms were formal and ruled by stern parents, books came from the library, computers existed only in science fiction. Some of you will recognise this. For much of the world, this picture is already privileged. But to many, it's a forgotten history.

Today, children - in wealthy parts of the world - live wholly surrounded by media of one kind and another. In the UK, three quarters of 5-15 year olds have internet access at home and the average number of televisions per household with children is 3.3 – mostly with multiple cable, satellite or digital channels. In their bedrooms - 71% TV set, 62% games console, 54% mobile phone, 48% DVD player and 11% have internet access (Ofcom, 2007).

These are not just changes in technology, in the consumption of stuff - they are changes in the patterns of, and possibilities for, communication. Partly, it is mass communication that is transformed – far more commercialised, profitable, market-led than when I was a child, and now on a transnational more than a national scale. Partly mass communication itself is being transformed by the growth of interactive, personalised and social media. Convergence is making it harder to draw distinctions among different media forms as they intersect and hybridise converging not only texts and technologies but also social habits and practices, including those of governance and regulation – or should I say, de-regulation.

For children, this is welcome! The media are with them all the time – on their person, in their pockets and their ears, embedded – or part of the wallpaper - in any space they enter, whether public or private. And they are delighted that it is so - they could not imagine life without the media – turning on the television or internet the minute they wake up or come home, falling asleep with their ipod or mobile phone by their pillow. For the 'always on', 'constantly connected', 'digital' generation, few experiences go unmediated, whether in the sphere of leisure or education, relations with peers or connection with their neighbourhood and beyond (Livingstone, 2008a). This mediation is characterised by its very casualness, the way it is taken-for-granted – even though it's fast becoming the main way children know about distant others and a key means by which they express – and know – themselves; it also absorbs far more money than my pocket stretched to several decades ago.

### **Beyond moral panics**

While for children, a media-rich environment has fast become a necessity, for adult observers, any optimism associated with changing media is strongly tempered by anxiety: both for us as expert observers – social scientists, policy advisors and policy makers, etc – and as ordinary members of the public. To be sure, the combination of children, media and change has always proved particularly explosive –catalyzing

society's perennial anxieties about childhood, triggering media headlines, public anxieties, moral panics, official inquiries.

Bruno Bettelheim (1999) traces moral panics about new media back via Goethe's 'Sorrows of Young Werther', blamed for a wave of suicides in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany, to Plato's ideal state that banned imaginative literature for corrupting the young. Since even the waltz appeared dissolute when first introduced, it's hardly surprising that public concerns accompanied the arrival of comics, cinema, television, computer games, internet:

"The indecent foreign dance called the *Waltz* was introduced ... at the English Court on Friday last ... It is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs, and close compressure of the bodies ... to see that it is far indeed removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females... we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion." (*The Times of London*, 1816)

In the academy, such moral panics have been roundly critiqued for scapegoating the media to deflect public attention from the real problems in society and for attempting middle class control over working class pleasures, thus denying the agency and good sense of the general public. But, a critical rejection of both moral panics and the technological determinism they imply does not permit us to conclude that the media play no role in children's lives.

In this lecture, I want to consider these changes – both in terms of changing media and also, more fundamentally, in terms of changing childhood - to ask what academic social science can offer to the clamour of public debate and policy formulation? Please accept my health warning – I shall focus on the UK, though the arguments go wider, on television and the internet primarily and I won't attend here to the vital differences among children – by age, gender or life circumstances. I should also say that there are no simple answers to be had, that some will disagree with me strongly, and that some can hardly credit my returning to so tired and stale a debate as that of empirical evidence for or against media effects.

So why am I thinking about all this now? Because 2007 was an eventful year for children's media in the UK, as I shall outline. But also because managing changes in the media has implications not only for children – though that's important enough – but it also has implications for society more broadly. Lurking behind many of the discussions around children and the media are some tough questions about changing relations between market, state and civil society. We must talk about these too.

It seems that when the debates over children's media get polarised and emotive, it's because children have become a stand-in for something else: a means of articulating anxieties about Western capitalism. At heart, these may be debates about tradition, authority or respect for shared values, or the balance between individualism and participation. In some circles, questions about children's protection and human dignity are 'heard' as elitist or moralising or an argument against freedom of expression and hence a covert move towards censorship. Given worldwide moves towards state control of the internet, of course one must recognise the force of this position.

But where then does this leave children? What media and communication environment may we realistically be able to provide for them? Let me begin with what happened in 2007.

## **2007 – An eventful year for children’s media**

On television - by the end of 2006, serious warnings over the children’s health led Ofcom to restrict advertising for food high in fat, sugar and salt during children’s viewing at an estimated loss of £30 million per year to the commercial broadcasters. Not coincidentally, ITV announced it would no longer meet its quota of 8 hours per week of children’s programming, and it has since ceased commissioning any new content, moving its weekday children’s programming from ITV1 to CITV and broadcasting game shows and light entertainment when children return from school. The only terrestrial channel to retain ‘children’s hour’ is BBC1, itself about to reduce this time slot when *Neighbours* moves to Channel 5, having already announced 1 in 5 job cuts in the Children’s Department and rumoured to be shifting all children’s programmes to BBC2. Meanwhile, Channel 4 announced the axing of its schools programmes, focusing instead on new content online.

Now, after a year with a lot of argument, the activities of a Save Kids TV lobby group, several public conferences and many headlines, it still seems that market forces dictate a stark choice between fat kids with good telly or thin kids with little good to watch!

But the problem lies in the quality rather than quantity of provision - though there now 25 channels broadcasting to children in this country only 1% of what’s shown is UK-originated first-run content – the rest is imports and repeats (Ofcom, 2007).

What about new media in 2007, especially the internet? It was the year of social networking – of MySpace and Facebook – reshaping not just how young people spend their time and stay in touch - but also a test of self-regulation: could the industry deal fairly with kids and parents regarding the covert collection of personal data, for example, or respond constructively to the huge new scope for bullies and stalkers without governments weighing in or kids turning away?

The European Commission held a public consultation on ‘Safer Internet and Online Technologies for Children’. The German EU Presidency ended its term with a debate over how to support positive provision for children online (Livingstone, 2007c). In the UK, Gordon Brown set up ‘The Byron Review on Children and New Technology’ to examine the risks to children’s safety and well-being from exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games. Somewhat redundantly perhaps, the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee announced an inquiry into ‘Harmful content on the internet and in video games’, broadening the focus to include all adults.

It looks like the notion that Britain ‘won’t regulate the internet’ is fast fading, and the struggle is on between advocates of state regulation versus self-regulation. Everyone’s favourite solution – media literacy – was suddenly a phrase on everyone’s lips, including in the Audiovisual Media Services Directive approved in November, perhaps influenced by its inclusion in the UK’s 2003 Communications Act. So there’s another serious balance to be struck: how far can we enable media-savvy kids to cope with online porn, grooming and race hate when they encounter it? Or should we restrict their online opportunities in order to spare them the risks?

### **The role of social science**

Behind many of these events lies the call for evidence. Social scientists are reviewing the evidence base, advising inquiries, and, of course, arguing! Within the academy, we’re witnessing some ironies. Social scientists who’ve long argued for the risks of

certain kinds of television content found themselves hunting down evidence that good television really benefits children. Critical scholars who've long attacked the complacent elitism of the BBC found themselves coming to its defence as the spectre of top-slicing the licence fee approaches. And, faced with some truly grim content to be found online – from beheadings and rape to pro-suicide sites and child-abuse networks – even the most libertarian confess to private concerns about media content.

Some of the issues at stake are as much political and moral as scientific, so of course, academics don't speak with a unified voice - it would be scary if we did but, nonetheless, it can be ineffective in policy terms if we don't. Moreover, despite half a century of social science, there are gaps in the evidence base. For example, it's unethical to test the consequences of exposing children to potential media harms; few seem to have thought to examine whether home-produced content is particularly beneficial for children; it's expensive to overcome the limitations of laboratory experiments by conducting naturalistic experiments in real-world circumstances; and it's very expensive to measure effects longitudinally.

Further, though evidence-based decisions sound good, in practice it's not a level playing field. The very sizeable and flexible resources of the industry and even the regulator outmanoeuvre those of the academy and dwarf those of civil society groups.

### **What the research shows**

There can be no simple conclusion regarding either potential media harms or benefits except for the frustrating but accurate statement of contextual contingency – 'it depends'. But here's a brief take on what the research shows (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006). For television, several decades of research have examined the effects of exposure to content – violence mainly, but also stereotyping, advertising etc. Many studies show that viewing violent television content may affect aggressive attitudes or behaviour, at least in the short-term, but such effects are generally modest in size. TV viewing is also associated with stereotyped beliefs about those different from ourselves, with unhealthy expectations regarding body image, with fearfulness regarding crime or threat; and as Hilde Himmeweit found even when television first arrived in Britain, children became more middle class in their aspirations, and girls conformed more to gender roles (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958).

On the plus side, research is also clear that television provides children with many pleasures, as well as a talking point among peers, a way of discussing tricky issues with parents; It offers a safe opportunity to test boundaries or explore emotions, a child-centred understanding of world events, and an opportunity to exercise imagination, become absorbed in narrative, appreciate new aesthetic forms and stimulate creativity and play (Davies & Thornham, 2007).

The internet contrasts with television in many ways. One is that the modest effects for television are found in the context of a highly regulated environment, one in which parents have played an active mediating role. The internet, by contrast, intensifies the media experience, including the very best and very worst of society, while also disintermediating parents. Not only are children often significantly more expert online than their parents, but the internet also offers children more subject positions, not just recipient of mass-produced content but also player, searcher, communicator, content creator, victim and, I'm afraid, perpetrator.

A recent Eurobarometer survey found that 18% of European parents believes their child (under 18 years old) has seen illegal or harmful content on the internet (Eurobarometer, 2006) – this varies a lot, being associated both with being new to the

internet and, perhaps paradoxically, with being experienced online (see Figure 1). The EU Kids Online project<sup>i</sup> has reviewed over 300 research projects in 21 countries – finding that, very approximately – among online teenagers: 20-30% have seen violent, gruesome or hate sites; 20% have experienced online bullying or hostility and 1 in 10 have sent such messages (Livingstone, 2007a). Further, 30-40% have seen online pornography; between 1 and 4 in 10 have gone to a meeting with someone they met online and similar proportions have been sexually harassed online. In America, a major survey in 2006 found that more 10-17 year olds had seen sexual material online than five years ago (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). An online Dutch survey reported that around half of online teens had been asked to undress on webcam (Bardoen & Pijpers, 2006).

Focusing on a different set of concerns, a recent study by the NCC and Childnet International showed that many of the websites visited by children contain commercial messages which children struggle to identify - especially advergames and product placement.<sup>ii</sup> Another NCC study adds that the more time children spend with television or computer screens, the more materialistic their attitudes (after controlling for gender and SES). Indeed, 34% of 9-13 year olds said they'd 'rather spend time buying things than doing almost anything else' and 46% said, 'the only kind of job I want when I grow up is one that gets me a lot of money'.<sup>iii</sup>

Thus far, most research about the internet has examined children's activities rather than actual harms, though many clinicians, police, and child welfare specialists now claim that the internet is implicated in, and exacerbates, the problems they see. This seems plausible, for many social activities are, for better or worse, eased, speeded up, spread further, more anonymous, longer lasting when mediated by the internet. But it must be acknowledged that we have little strong evidence as yet that using the internet is resulting in more childhood unhappiness, disturbance or danger, though nor have we much showing that it aids children's learning, creativity and participation, notwithstanding the persuasive claims of educationalists, politicians and, indeed, the industry. Since society is happy to act on these latter claims, an equivalent paucity of evidence should not, in fairness, prevent it acting on the former.

### **Television no longer matters?**

When considering the problems faced by children's television broadcasters, some have been tempted to conclude that these no longer matter – children have turned to the internet instead. You'll see by now that I think this is a mistake. To be sure, children often describe television as 'boring' while embracing the internet with an enthusiasm that fully appreciates what an astonishing resource it is, transforming their opportunities for learning, peer culture, creative expression, civic connection and more.

But, every child still wants – and most get - a television in their bedroom, switching it on is the first thing they do when they come home from school, the latest celebrity reality show or teen soap opera is what they talk about with their friends at school, and even their favourite websites are TV-related. Significantly, they still spend more time with television than with any other medium, and neither more nor less than they did when television was first introduced into Britain half a century ago (Livingstone, in press).

The internet, on the other hand, remains socially divided in terms of accessibility and use, this making television look like an instrument of equality. Further, much that is of value online is hard to find, even for the so-called 'internet generation'. It is highly

commercialised, addressing children far more as consumers than as citizens. And, crucially, it introduces as many risks and problems as it promises solutions.

In short, children live in a multi-media environment, and this is unlikely to change. New media rarely replace older media, though they do remediate them – altering but not usurping their place in our lives. Thus in media policy circles, we should continue to press for high quality children's broadcasting that encompasses a diversity of genres and represents a breadth of cultures, including children's own.

In the academy, the very complexity of children's multimedia worlds suggests it's time to stop the search for simple and direct causal effects of particular media. And instead, turn the question around and ask about the role the media play within the complex array of factors that combine to explain particular social problems.

Consider the research on obesity. Following findings from the Royal College of Physicians, among others, that obesity has doubled among 2-4 year olds between 1989 and 1998, and trebled among 6-15 year olds between 1990 and 2002, researchers worldwide are making a concerted effort to identify a wide range of factors that may explain rising obesity. These factors have been variously classified – biological and social factors, or individual, community and societal factors, etc. All have been researched, in one way or another, and all have been shown to play a role, of one kind or another. Importantly, they can and should be examined in relation to each other – each influences the others, in complex ways. Among these findings is evidence that television exposure is consistently associated with obesity; the correlation is statistically significant but not large, explaining 5% or less of the variation in children's food choice or weight (Livingstone & Helsper, 2004).

Unfortunately, perhaps because those conducting these big representative surveys rarely consult the field of media and communication, they haven't disentangled three possible explanations: is television viewing linked to obesity because it involves junk food advertising, or because kids sit on the sofa and snack, or because it displaces getting some exercise? We don't know. Still, this approach puts media exposure in its place – it's part of the story, not by any means the whole story. It's as implausible to leave it out as it is to give it pride of place.

But my concern here is broader than obesity. What are all the factors involved in explaining aggression or violence? Or for materialist values? Or girls' body image difficulties? In fact, the US Surgeon General has reported risk factors for aggressive behaviour in children: in order of effect size, these include: being in a gang, playing violent video games, psychological condition, poor parent-child relations, being male, prior physical violence, exposure to media violence, antisocial parents, low IQ, living in a broken home, poverty, risk-taking, abusive parents and, last, substance abuse.<sup>iv</sup>

One may wish to examine these findings closely. My point is that we need more research like this. If we don't put media influences in context, we'll never stop policy makers and the public thinking in terms of the mythic hypodermic needle of media influence. Drawing an explanatory map of relevant factors for other social ills would force us to define them, clarifying just who is worried about which aspect of childhood. For example, what's at stake when we protect children from pornography? Their present innocence or their future sexual development? That they will become abusers or victims? Or, how serious are we about childhood aggression? Do we really think it has increased over time? Or is the concern more with identifying who's especially vulnerable to influence? This approach would also make us identify the range of relevant and intersecting factors at work, so as to weigh their relative

contribution and so permitting a balanced judgement of the media's role depending on children's particular life circumstances.

### **Looking more broadly at children's lives**

Interestingly, as soon as we look more broadly at children's lives, another picture comes into focus, another series of changes between the lives of children today and that of many of us when we were young. When I was a child, my friends left school at 15 or 16 and began earning, and few went to university. Now nearly all stay in school till 18, nearly half go to university, and they're still living at home through their twenties. On the other hand, as every parent I've ever interviewed has told me, forty years ago they packed their cheese sandwiches and headed for a local wasteland to explore all day. Today, the Children's Society reports that 43% of adults say children should not be allowed out with friends until they are 14. In 1971, 80% of 7-8 year olds walked to school on their own; by 1990 this had dropped to 9%.

As Stephanie Coontz put it, over the past century, 'childhood has actually been prolonged, if it is measured by dependence on parents and segregation from adult activities', especially valued activities, and this dependence is in a state of tension with young people's growing autonomy in the realms of leisure, consumption, appearance, identity (Coontz, 1997). Sociologists have, of course, been mapping out these changes in the family over the past half century, including progressive urbanisation, the persistence of social inequality and emergence of an underclass, growing gender equality, cultural diversification in terms of ethnicity, religion and sexuality, the decline in political participation, together contributing to what Ulrich Beck called 'risk society', what Anthony Giddens called the post-traditional or 'democratic' family along with Mark Abrams' discovery of 'teenagers' (Abrams, 1959; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1993).

While children exercise new-found rights, parents agonise over new-found anxieties. And much of this is played out over the media. As outside becomes risky, children are kept at home. Faced with anxieties about streets, parks, even the swimming pool, home seems safer. To occupy them, we fill our homes with media. To give them and us some privacy, we equip their bedrooms. To keep them in touch with friends, we give them mobiles and internet access. If we are worried, guilty, in need of a celebration, lacking in resources, rushed for time or flush with cash, the media – in one way or another – provide a ready answer.

In short, for most parents, the media are less the problem than the solution. Bedroom culture, online culture, mediated relationships - these are shaped significantly by society's history of decisions regarding the rest of children's lives - decisions that have often downplayed children's rights to participate fully in their communities (Livingstone, 2007b). We invest in roads and cars rather than cycle paths, we build multiplex cinemas on children's playing fields, etc. Nor can this be easily reversed, for the media are now bound up inextricably with all the other changes shaping children's lives – the rise of consumer society and the positioning of children as a market and the domestication of leisure and the transformation of the home into an expression of identity and achievement. The media are, in today's mediated world, indispensable.

This is not to say, however, that parents' perception of the real problems facing their children is entirely accurate. The Risk Commission reported in 2007 that each year, for every million children in the UK:<sup>v</sup>

- 0.03 are seriously injured in a playground

- Less than one is murdered by a stranger
- 6 are abducted by a stranger
- 17 are killed as a car passenger and 7 are killed as pedestrians
- 32 die from cancer
- 73 are murdered, mainly by parents
- Over 1,500 teenagers are involved in knife crime
- 2,400 are involved in a road accident
- 40,000 are sexually abused by a parent, relative or carer and 70,000 are physically abused
- Around 50,000 11-15 year olds have severe gambling difficulties
- 140,000 2-10 year olds are obese
- And 270,000 10-25 year olds say they have been the victim of crime in the previous year

These statistics surely suggest we should worry more about street crime, parental abuse and the car than we should paedophiles or play in public parks. It does seem fair, however, to worry about gambling – linked to the internet, some evidence suggests, and about obesity – certainly correlated with television viewing. Moreover, street crime and the risk posed by the car are common reasons why parents keep their children at home, safe with the media rather than at risk outdoors. And it's the media that have panicked them about paedophiles on the internet.

The Risk Commission's point, by the way, was to shift the discourse away from wrapping children in cotton wool and keeping them safe. Instead, to recognise that children need to learn to cope with risk, to become resilient. For teenagers especially will always take risks, push adult imposed boundaries. And, as my UK Children Go Online project revealed clearly, online as offline, the opportunities and risks go hand in hand – providing opportunities brings risks with it, and you can't easily reduce risks without restricting opportunities (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).

## **Conclusions**

I don't have a solution to the ills besetting childhood. But I do have some points to bring out about the media.

First, when mapping the multiple and intersecting influences on children and childhood – family, school, community, peers, culture, religion, media – the media are, in one key respect, the odd one out. They are, setting aside only public service television, almost entirely commercial. Consequently, they have never been central to the public policy agenda – at least, not like families, schools and communities. Sentences beginning 'the media should...' have nowhere to go. And this is, of course, because independence of state and media is vital to democracy. I don't question that. But I see this serving the interests of the market more than the interests of children, and children are citizens too.

Consider what The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has to say. Defining a 'child' as anyone under 18 (not the broadcasters' 15 or, even, 12), this asserts children's rights to freedom of expression through any medium of the child's choice (Art. 13) and to mass media that disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child, with particular regard to the linguistic needs of



minority/indigenous groups, and to protection from material injurious to the child's well-being (Art. 17). As Ivor Frønes and Trond Waage emphasise, the Convention is concerned with "not only rights to protection, speech and welfare, but also a right to unfold and develop capacities". Crucially, they add, while "socialization is anticipatory; the visions of the future exist as values in the present" - we must ask, therefore, what values our media offer? (Frønes & Waage, 2006)

I conclude that, wherever possible, we should argue strongly for good media, quality media, media in the interests of children. I say this knowing the we – academics, broadcasters, journalists, parents – have not managed to define quality. And that attempts to do so sound elitist. But the failings of families or education don't – except under extreme circumstances – lead us to suggest bringing up children without parents or schools. Instead, we seek to support parent and to improve schools. So too might we think how to support better television, better online content – as argued, for example, by the Internationally-endorsed but little enacted Children's Television Charter or, more recently, by The Council of Europe's call last November for 'measures to promote the public service value of the internet'.

Second, can we move beyond the simplistic opposition between child protection and freedom of expression? Think back again - many boys and some girls always had top shelf porn under the bed. But online, the top shelf material is a click or two from the next step – material that was really hard to find when I was young and that many of us therefore didn't know it existed. Similarly, when I was young, an anorexic teenager was doubtless as unhappy as today; but a supportive network of other anorexics swapping tips on how to hide dieting and vomiting from parents was much harder to come by. I'm trying to flag up the conditions of accessibility – not, that we should simply 'control this or ban that', as a letter in the Financial Times commented dismissively this week.

Think of it in terms of town planning. Not only do we try to provide children with sex education before they are old enough to evade the regulatory controls of the television watershed or the cinema's age restrictions but we also agree not to position sex shops next to schools. Similarly, not only do we teach children about stranger danger and seek to control the movements of sex offenders but we also take care over the positioning of children's playgrounds, and we've accepted rules about the use of cameras in swimming pools, and so on. Indeed, in the physical world, we govern the use of public space in a whole host of ways that rely neither on 100% successful teaching of 'good behaviour' to children and parents nor on censorship of adult freedoms.

Significantly, town planning is not simply a matter of commercial self-regulation. Rather, it works – ideally at least – through publicly accountable, transparent, independent bodies with democratic structures, appeals processes and clear remits. There are some emerging examples in the online world too. For example, the UK mobile industry has adopted an opt in rather than an opt out system for accessing 'adult' content. Other examples include regulations concerning the collection of personal data from children, care regarding defaults on privacy settings, provision of moderation services, warning pages before pay-for pornography, child-friendly advice and information on sites where this may be needed, report abuse buttons in chat rooms, and so forth. The Home Secretary's Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet is showing the way here, most recently in relation to social networking.

Third, let's be positive but not naïve about media literacy. Kirsten Drotner (1992) observes that, historically, the introduction of each latest technology follows a sociological progression from a 'pessimistic elitism', in which the establishment seeks to control, top-down, the media enjoyed by the mass public towards an 'optimistic pluralism' that affirms both the public's general good sense and the legitimacy of diversity within it. You might ask, how can one question efforts to empower the public, to raise critical awareness of both media contents and media institutions, and to encourage diverse public participation?

Yet many scholars are, rightly, suspicious that the underlying goal of the new attention to media literacy is that of supporting economic competition by increasing consumer knowledge and awareness in order to legitimate the reduction of top-down regulatory intervention. In other words, it's part of the broader shift from direct control by government to governance through "action at a distance" characteristic of neoliberal market economies (Lunt & Livingstone, 2007).

I am particularly concerned about any implication that relying on media literacy as the backstop strategy can work – that precisely when other strategies fail, media literacy can save the day. In the present media environment, children will encounter content, contact, conduct and commercialism for which they are unprepared because education takes time and because it can only be introduced at the right time you cannot teach a child below 7 or 8 that advertising seeks to persuade them for commercial profit, for example. And at what age do we wish to prepare our daughters for the image one click away, as I found yesterday, of a teenager being raped by a burglar?

Moreover, in practice, like all forms of knowledge, media literacy is *uneven* in its implementation, *unequal* in its adoption by those of differential social status, *inconsistently* applied as a guide to behaviours, *under-resourced* in its delivery and, surprising to many, *unproven* in its effectiveness. Exactly the same applies, unfortunately, to any strategy of filtering, monitoring or social regulation that relies on parenting.

The response of public policy makers is critical. But so too are less-visible activities of content providers, designers, innovators, educators and the many others who, by shaping the new media environment, set the context within new media literacies can develop. Much also depends on how we define the media literacy agenda. On the one hand, the greater the social, economic, cultural and political ambitions advocated for the information society and, especially, for its so-called 'internet generation', the greater the demands on media literacy - hence the value of ambitious definitions of media literacy, in the services of an empowered public. On the other hand, the more minimal the demands on media literacy, especially as regards child protection, the more readily they may be met, thus legitimating a neo-liberal deregulatory policy for the media and communication sector nationally and internationally (Livingstone, 2008b).

Ironically, therefore, those of us who wish to support positive public policies, institutions and values, including those that may empower children and young people as active citizens find themselves emphasising the failure to meet ambitious expectations regarding public levels of media literacy (rather than, as has long been the critical tradition in media studies, celebrating the active media-savvy audience in the face of dominant media institutions). Actually, this is an easy case to make. On most simple measures in current usage (from can you fix a problem with your computer or install a filter, do you know who to call with a complaint or worry, can

you identify online sponsorship or political bias, have you contributed to a message board or blog, etc), the answers for both adults and children are below twenty percent.

So, let's support media literacy, for sure. But as part of a multi-stakeholder strategy that places demands on industry and government as well as individuals, not just so that they understand the media better, but more importantly, as a key means of enabling them to participate wisely, creatively and fully in the world they find themselves in.

And finally, to those for whom deregulation is the best way forward, and who, unwilling simply to dismiss worried parents and take a strong libertarian position, find themselves arguing for the highly media literate child and with the parent as backstop authority (an argument Rupert Murdoch would not be unhappy with), I suggest that Nik Rose's (1990) argument applies. Following Foucault, he argues that we can only be free of the state by action at a distance - what he called 'governing the soul' i.e. requiring that the burden of regulation is met by parents and children; escaping regulation altogether is not an option.

Moreover, this argument advances what Ulrich Beck (1992) has critiqued as 'the individualisation - or stratification - of risk', which is what it will be, since parents are unequally resourced and children unevenly media literate. Since many of the ills of childhood - from aggressive behaviour to obesity, from early sexualisation to mental health problems - are socially stratified, are correlated not only with media use but also with limited economic and social resources with which to cope, this is hardly a good, or fair, solution for most children.

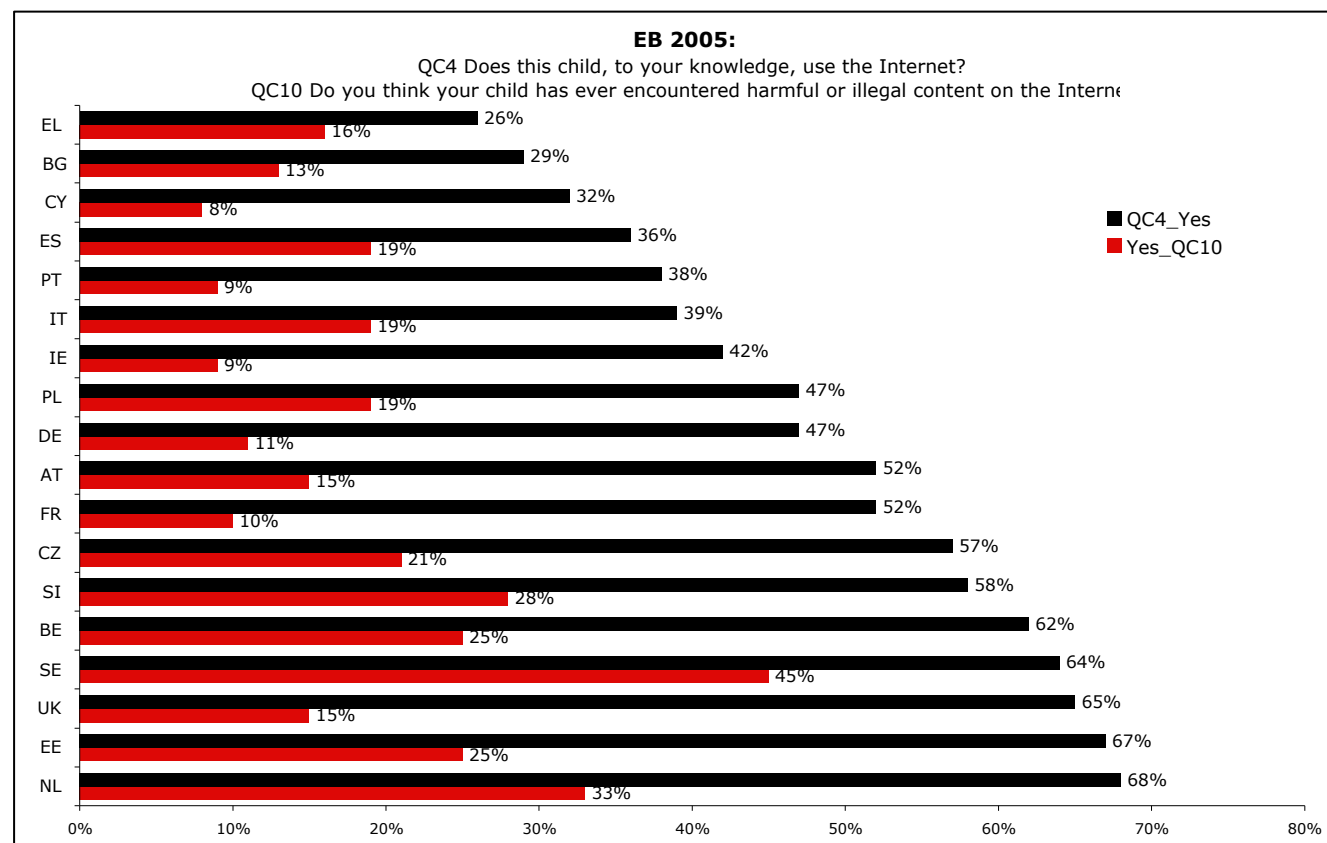
In conclusion, now that we live in a ubiquitous and complex media and communication environment, we must recognise that this environment shapes our identities, our culture and learning, our approach to others and thus the conditions for our participation in society. No one can live outside it, no child wants to. I am not arguing that children should spend more or less time with the media, but rather that, however they engage with the media, it should benefit them. And as society imposes ever more restrictions on what children are free to do outside their front door, what we provide for them at home becomes ever more crucial.

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Figure 1



## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.childnet.com/publications/policy.aspx>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC167rr\\_watching\\_wanting\\_wellbeing.pdf](http://www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC167rr_watching_wanting_wellbeing.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Reported in Anderson, C. A., Gentile, D. A., & Buckley, K. E. (2007). *Violent video game effects on children and adolescents : theory, research, and public policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.rsariskcommission.org/uploads/documents/Risk%20and%20Childhood%20Final%20Report\\_139.pdf](http://www.rsariskcommission.org/uploads/documents/Risk%20and%20Childhood%20Final%20Report_139.pdf)