

Historical and Recurring Concerns about Children's Use of the Mass Media

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Promises, Promises. That is what proponents of every new media technology over the past 100 or so years have made. How the movies, or radio, or television, or computers would fundamentally alter the way children learn – making children smarter at younger ages or making learning easier and more accessible to more children – have been recurring claims. Juxtaposed to these are the naysayers who decry children's time spent with media content that is morally questionable – too much sex, too much violence, too commercial. In many places this history of recurring controversies that surround the introduction of each of the mass media of the twentieth century has been recounted (Davis, 1965; Paik, 2001; Rogers, 2003; Wartella & Jennings, 2000; Wartella & Reeves, 1985).

What are the roots of the recurring historical concerns about children's use of media? Apart from the specific medium of concern, has anything about how children use media or are influenced by media changed over the past 100 years? In this chapter, we will examine these issues. Our plan is not to recount a new historical view of the controversies which have recurred. Rather, we hope to provide a slightly different angle on the nature of these recurring controversies and we suggest that some things have changed, especially since the advent of television. The dominance of television and other screen media in children's lives has been sustained longer than the dominant role of earlier technologies and the potential impact may be more powerful as well.

Time

Life events unfold over the course of time (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselroade, 1988). Who children spend time with – be it parents, peers, teachers, clergy, media characters – and the context and content of that time spent provide important parameters of the health and welfare of children. Because the activities of daily life provide the knowledge, skills, and behaviors children acquire as they develop,

it is no wonder that so much of parental concern focuses on how children spend their time. Are children spending enough time working on schoolwork? Are they playing too much . . . or too little? Are children spending too much time watching television, playing videogames, or browsing on the computer?

Not only is children's use of time of concern to parents, it is also a public policy concern. How much time should children spend in school? At what age can children spend time unsupervised and not be thought to be neglected by their caregivers?

Since children historically have been early and eager adopters of media technologies, Wartella and Reeves (1985) argued that how much time is taken up with media is at the root of the recurring controversies about children and the media. These controversies are personal and of concern to parents, as well as public topics of recurring public discussion, debate, and regulation.

Historical Influences and Changes in Children's Use of Leisure Time

The cycle of recurring concerns about children spending time with media was set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during the Progressive Era from roughly 1880 to 1930. During this period, the rise of the scientific study of children, the establishment of federal social legislation to monitor the health and welfare of children, and the institutionalization of public education for children occurred (Hawes & Hiner, 1985). Clearly, there was acknowledgement that children's needs and interests were now topics to be considered by policymakers as well as parents and caregivers during this period (Cravens, 1985). In addition to attention being focused on children, a new social category of adolescence as a distinct stage in the lifecycle of human development became institutionalized and a topic of public discussion (Hawes & Hiner, 1985). Finally, during this period far-reaching technological and social changes brought about a new concept of leisure time, discretionary time when children and adolescents could choose with whom and with what to spend their free time (Somers, 1971). The automobile, movies, and radio were revolutionizing how children and adults spent their time and marked a distinct break with earlier generations (Lynd & Lynd, 1929).

Exactly how children and adolescents spent their time became a barometer of their health and welfare during this period, and the earliest scientific studies of how children spent their time emerged (Wartella & Mazarella, 1990). In recounting the historical changes in children's use of time during the twentieth century, Wartella and Mazarella (1990) observed that as early as the second decade of the twentieth century, there was already concern about children having too much leisure time. Moreover, their leisure time was increasingly being spent with first film, and then radio and films, and later television. The ongoing theme of concern about children's leisure time use masks a fundamental shift that occurred after the introduction of television into American life. In short, television colonized

Americans' leisure time. This phenomenon is most apparent in looking at the differences in how children spent their leisure time before and after the emergence of television.

Perhaps the easiest way of demonstrating the quantitative difference in how children spent their time over the course of the twentieth century is to describe what available evidence we have on time use. An early time use study by M. M. Davis (1911), who surveyed 1,140 children aged 11 to 14 in the 1910s, found that 62 percent of these children reported going to the movies once or twice a week. By the 1930s media time use had increased due to the popularity of radio. For instance, sociologists Lundberg, Komarovsky, and McNerny (1934) conducted extensive fieldwork in Westchester County, New York, and had 795 high-school students keep a diary of their leisure time use during 1932 and early 1933. They found both social-class- and gender-based differences in the amount of leisure time youth reported: those from more economically deprived backgrounds spent more time at paid jobs outside the home and girls spent more time in domestic work than boys. Although there was a considerable amount of leisure time, most of it was not spent on media use. For instance, Lundberg and colleagues found that his suburban adolescents averaged 7 hours and 25 minutes of leisure time on weekdays and about 11 hours on weekend days. Most of this time, however, was spent away from home hanging out with friends, attending club meetings, participating in or watching sports events, going to church-related activities, or motoring. Reports of the amount of this leisure time spent with media were relatively small in that most leisure time was spent away from home. Even when at home, the number one pastime of listening to the radio did not take up vast amounts of time: "two thirds of a sample group of children spent at least one half hour listening in on everything from detective stories to the Lucky Strike Orchestra. This pursuit occupies more of the boys' time than of the girls' and takes up from 17 to 30 percent of all leisure which the children spend at home" (Lundberg, 1934, as cited in Wartella & Mazzarella, p. 181). In total Lundberg and colleagues estimated that their sample of high-school students spent 11 percent of their leisure time, or 4 hours and 40 minutes per week with radio, and another 5.5 hours per week going to movies, concerts, or listening to records for a total of a little over 10 hours *per week* with the mass media.

Now compare that 10 hour weekly media use figure with the amount of media use time Timmer, Eccles, and O'Brien (1985) found 50 years later in a national sample of US children. Using children's self-reports via a similar diary method to that used by Lundberg and his colleagues, Timmer, Eccles, and O'Brien found that their sample of children reported 14 hours and 14 minutes per week of television use alone. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the proliferation and penetration of media into children's daily lives resulted in yet another quantum leap in the way that children spent their leisure time. For example, current media use studies (e.g., Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005) report that 8–18-year-old youth spend about 6.5 hours *a day* with various media (e.g., television, computers, and videogames) in the home. Even babies and young

children under age 6 spent an average of 2 hours per day with screen media (Rideout & Hamel, 2006).

Put simply, while media have been a part of children's leisure time since the 1910s, there has been an overall shift in the role that screen media, especially television, play during children's leisure time. This shift led not only to a quantitative change in how children spent their leisure time, but also to a qualitative shift as youth increasingly added media activities to their leisure activities that historically had taken place outside the home.

Television's Introduction into Children's Lives and Time Use

As occurred with other mass media including radio and films, the introduction of television into American life was received with ambivalence on the part of the public. Television was seen both as a utopian instrument of egalitarianism and as a destructive device capable of wreaking havoc on family life. In the words of Spigel (1992), television was a "panacea for the broken homes and hearts of wartime life," (p. 2) as well as the object that could destroy family relationships and cause massive disruptions to the smooth functioning of households. Some critics saw an opportunity to use television to keep children off the street and in their homes, strengthening the family unit and promoting education. Others worried about the impact of television on children, fearing they might imitate dangerous or socially undesirable behaviors after viewing antisocial television content, thereby becoming more aggressive or delinquent. Another concern, germane to this discussion, was simply the amount of time children were spending with television. However, these early apprehensions failed to stop television from quickly becoming a common presence in American households.

After a decade of existence as a technological curiosity, television began to catch on with Americans at the end of the Second World War. A postwar economic prosperity saw consumer spending increase by 60 percent in the five years after the end of the war (Spigel, 1992). Much of this spending went to consumer electronic appliances, including brisk sales of televisions. In 1946, televisions occupied a miniscule 0.02 percent of homes. By 1950, this had increased to 9 percent and by 1955, 65 percent of US homes held a set. Spigel (1992) notes that the adoption of television sets coincided with an increasing birth rate, as well as the rise of the middle class in America. A reemerging focus on domesticity gave rise to the notion of the nuclear family as an American ideal, where recreation and family activities were highly valued. Television was the most prominent of these family, recreational activities. Could television actually function as a glue to keep families closer? Not surprisingly, social scientists of the era, who were concerned about television's increasingly important and time-consuming role, questioned the use of this new medium and how it impacted children and families.

Assessments of television use reveal a trend of increased total home television use. Television sets were on for about six hours per day in the 1960s, increased to 7 hours by the end of the 1970s, and jumped yet again to about 8 hours at the end of the 1980s (Comstock, 1989). This should not be confused with viewing. Rather it reflects how often the television is on during the day, even when no one is watching. George Comstock (1989) noted the omnipresence of television in American homes, saying “the large number of hours that the set is on each day in the average household makes it the framework within which human interaction occurs” (p. 253).

The upsurge in television use coincides with a shift from one-set households to multi-set households. According to 2003 Census data, televisions now exist in 98.2 percent of homes. In fact, the Census revealed that there are a staggering 260 million televisions in this country, or about 2.4 televisions per home (US Census Bureau, 2006). Televisions have increasingly become a part of children’s bedrooms; 68 percent of children aged 8–18 and 36 percent of children under age 6 have television sets in their own rooms (Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Rideout et al., 2003; Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Not surprisingly, children with television sets in their rooms tend to view more than those who have no sets in their rooms (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005).

Did this time in front of a television actually provide a context for family contact and interaction? The answer seems to be no. In the early days of television, one-set households were far more common, leading advocates to propose that television was a unifying factor, physically bringing families together in the home to watch common programming that could be enjoyed by all. But as Spigel (1992) noted, bringing together a family to watch television did not necessarily translate into increased interactions between family members. Indeed, Maccoby (1951) found that although families did watch together, there was increased family togetherness only in the sense of family members being physically in the same room. Television did not promote much interaction in the way of talking to each other while viewing. Maccoby characterizes the viewing experience as follows:

The viewing atmosphere in most households is one of quiet absorption in the programs on the part of the family members who are present. The nature of the family social life during a program could be described as “parallel” rather than interactive, and the set does seem quite clearly to dominate family life when it is on. (p. 428)

With the increase in multi-set households, the perceived benefit of using television to bring families closer seems to have disappeared. The new household setup allows individuals to view their preferred programming apart from other family members. Rather than serving as a medium that binds people together, the increase in multi-set households may actually serve to segregate youth from their parents (Wartella & Mazarella, 1990).

With television occupying significant parts of the child's day, what activities are given up for viewing? One study found that television use reduced the amount of time devoted to other leisure activities, including other kinds of media consumption (Riley, Cantwell, & Ruttiger, 1949). Children without access to television listened to the radio for about 30 minutes in the evening. By comparison, children with access to television viewed approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes at night and listened to the radio for about 2 minutes, which is an increase in media use of almost 2 hours. Reading also seemed to decline with the introduction of television in a community in Norwich, Great Britain: 13–14-year-old viewers read about 1.75 hours per week, while non-viewers read about 2.5 hours – a 45 minute difference (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958).

The differences in media use patterns support the idea that television is a unique media form in the way that it “colonizes” leisure time, occupying time normally spent with other media or leisure activities (Sahin & Robinson, 1981). In their review of children's use of leisure time, Wartella and Mazzarella (1990) noted the early research evidence pointing to a reorganization of children's time. Rather than simply displacing other leisure-time activities such as outdoor sports, playing musical instruments, going to the movies, or listening to the radio, researchers documented an increase in the overall amount of time devoted to mass media use.

Might new technologies affect children's time in ways similar to television when it was first introduced? Recent studies suggest that new media such as computers, videogame consoles, and the Internet have failed to displace television from its perch of dominance. Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) found that levels of total media exposure, as measured by the amount of time using any individual medium (screen, audio, or print), had increased from 7 hours and 29 minutes to 8 hours and 33 minutes in the five-year span from 1999 to 2004. The increase was attributed to increased videogame and computer exposure during that time, while television remained static at just over 3 hours a day. However, in terms of media use, which takes into consideration that more than one medium may be used at the same time (e.g., reading while watching television or playing videogames while listening to music), the levels remained almost identical over the same five-year span at about 6 hours, 20 minutes. Rideout and her colleagues suggest this finding indicates a ceiling in the amount of time children can or will dedicate to using media. In other words, not only might there be a limit for time allotted to media use, but new technologies are not displacing television or other media forms in the amount of time they consume. To make room for computers and videogames, children are multitasking more frequently, spending about 26 percent of their media time with more than one medium at the same time. However, Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) did not measure cell phone or iPod use in their study, media that can be and are used at times in the absence of other media. Moreover, the overall amount of time spent using media has still increased over what was occurring when the newer technologies were not available in most children's homes.

The screen media are now a part of even the very youngest babies' waking hours. This trend raises yet again concerns about children's use of time with media. In the next section we will take up another aspect of the recurring controversies about media and youth: the appropriateness of the media content for child users. While there have been recurring controversies about violent and sexual content in the media, there has also been a growing improvement in youth- or child-oriented content. But is quality age-appropriate content even a good use of a baby's time?

The Rise of Children's Content

Since the earliest days when film was introduced into US society, there has been interest and indeed programming for youth. Over time, and especially since the advent of television, there has also been increasing interest in programming more content for youth and for ever younger children. Today we have media content developed specifically for babies. Moreover, this shift in programming content especially directed to children and youth arises both to attract youthful audiences and to counter concerns about the effects of violent and sexual content of the media on children. One piece of evidence of the ever expanded range of media content for children comes from comparison of the kinds of programming available over the course of the twentieth century. A second piece of evidence involves the growth of concern about youth as an audience for media. For instance, violence and sexuality were once concerns; now even educational content is of concern when directed at infants. In this section, we track this emergence of child-directed content across the dominant media at various historical time periods.

The content and issues of film

In a wide-ranging book on the history of the "American audience," Richard Butsch (2000) notes the changes that occurred in public interest in audiences at the turn of the twentieth century and the rise of the mass media. Whereas theater audiences before the twentieth century were noted for their activity (e.g., shouting at the performers, asking for specific songs, teasing actors on the stage, and generally engaging in rowdy behavior), active audiences were not the concern of the film era. As Butsch notes:

as movies became popular in the early twentieth century, public debate shifted from a focus on audience behavior to a worry about the movies' content and its effects on audiences, particularly children. Attention shifted from the place to the play, from effects of dangerous people in those places to effects of dangerous media messages on people. Audiences were being redefined through the rest of the twentieth century. (pp. 6–7)

From the beginnings of movie-going at the turn of the twentieth century through the 1920s and 1930s, children and youth were clearly members of movie audiences, but there is little evidence that specific films were created just for them. But that does not mean that producers did not want to attract children to their films. As early as 1929, Walt Disney instituted a series of promotional activities to attract children to his movies; he instituted Mickey Mouse Clubs with weekly meetings at local theaters for Saturday matinee showings (Butsch, 2000).

A number of factors converged in the first third of the twentieth century which raised concerns about youthful audiences' viewing of films. For example, large numbers of unchaperoned children and adolescents (and here the data are more anecdotal than substantive) were reported to be attending movies in the 1910s and the 1920s. The Progressive Era's interest in saving the recent immigrant and poorer children focused on the role of movies in leading to delinquency among boys and sexual immorality among girls. (Child advocates, known then as "child savers," such as Jane Addams claimed that movies were the source of ideas of delinquent behavior among the children she counseled; Butsch, 2000). When combined with the rising interest in adolescence as a distinct period of childhood, youthful movie-going audiences were seen as being in need of protection from the effects of media. Psychologist Hugo Münsterberg (1916) refers to the way in which the audience's "mind is so completely given up to the moving pictures" (p. 221).

Yet, there is no evidence of large-scale children's films being produced, even though enterprising mothers and child savers tried to develop guidelines for what were and were not appropriate films for children. Indeed, as Butsch notes, throughout the 1910s there were a number of women's groups in cities across the country who attempted to organize special Saturday movie matinees that were more appropriate for youthful audiences.

The published commentary surrounding the early days of film, including debates over censorship of films during and right after the First World War, is filled with attempts by the proponents of the film industry to demonstrate the educational benefits to be derived from that medium. For instance, Thomas Edison, a famous inventor and holder of many of the key patents for movies, proclaimed in 1913 that films might do away with schoolbooks (*Holiday Magazine*, 1913). Edison argued that films could educate better than teachers in classrooms because of their ability to use vivid and compelling visuals and sounds of distant places, peoples, and ideas. Consequently, Edison Studios were involved in producing educational films. In 1914 *Nation* magazine commented on the "teaching provided by the motion pictures," and exhorted educators to look on films more positively with the commentary that "within the next decade, the moving pictures will be the indispensable adjunct of every teacher and education lecturer" (p. 154).

Nonetheless, it was difficult to find evidence of the production of educational films that would be appropriate for children during the 1910s and into the 1920s. For instance, according to industry figures from 1911, in the earliest days of the film industry and when the industry was trying to develop a positive image in the

public's mind, very few educational films were produced. Of 630 independent and licensed films produced that year, only 5 percent were categorized as educational, 2 percent were current events, and 86 percent were entertainment dramas (Wartella, 1991). This pattern helped to fuel a censorship movement during that time. In 1909, a National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures was organized and for several years it inspected some 95 percent of the films produced in the United States. This board had the authority to keep films from public screening or to recommend modifications in the films. For several years thereafter there were continued attempts to introduce national legislation to set up a national licensing board for all films. These attempts failed. Meanwhile the film industry continued to promote the idea of socially responsible movies (Jowett, 1976).

Public controversies about the morality and educational potential of films led to increased interest in how movies were impacting youthful audiences. It is with the Payne Fund Studies of the late 1920s and early 1930s that public concerns about media's effects on youth became the topic of social scientific studies. Between 1928 and 1933, The Payne Fund, a private foundation from New York, supported 12 major investigations into films' effects on youth. These studies brought together the finest social scientists of the day to examine the effects of movies on youth's knowledge, attitudes, social behavior, and leisure time pursuits. The focus was clearly on the influence of film's sexual and violent content on young people.

As noted in *Movies and Conduct* (Blumer, 1933) and *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* (Blumer & Hauser, 1933), the movies did indeed "implant" their ideas about social behavior in young people's minds and were powerful in influencing youth's behavior. Just as the arrival of movies set the stage for concerns about the types of content children were being exposed to, the Payne Fund Studies established an "effects paradigm" for studying how media content influences audiences. The Payne Studies also set the stage for recurring concerns about violent and sexual content in influencing youth and adolescent behavior.

The content and issues of radio

The introduction of radio into American life came with similar concerns about the role of this medium in children's lives and about the kinds of content available to children. From the late 1920s through the mid-1930s, radio increased its time devoted to self-designated "children's shows." According to Eisenberg (1936), the total number of children's radio programming hours per year provided by the four leading stations in New York City increased from 34.5 hours total in 1928 (or about 40 minutes per week), to 70.5 hours in 1929 (or about 81 minutes per week) to 304.5 hours in 1930 (or nearly 6 hours per week) to 1093.75 hours in 1933 (or slightly more than 21 hours per week). In short, the amount of time devoted to children's shows substantially expanded in a five-year period. Yet, over this same period, the number of educational stations in the country diminished. In 1927 there were 95 local educational radio stations in

the country, typically affiliated with a local school system or college, and 115 non-profit stations typically associated with a religious group. By 1934, only 35 educational radio stations remained along with 30 non-profit stations (McChesney, 1987).

Critics of children's radio shows considered them to be violent, emotionally arousing, and suspenseful – not educational. One group of parents from Scarsdale, New York, created an offshoot of the local Parent Teacher Association to lobby against commercial radio's children's programs. In 1934, the Women's National Radio Committee was formed by representatives of 28 women's organizations around the country. Among their activities was publication of an approved list of radio programs for children. The networks responded. According to Dorothy Gordon (1942), the radio networks in 1938 introduced a number of well-publicized educational programs that won praise from parents' groups as well as professional groups of child advocates, such as the American Library Association and the Child Study Association. There were programs on music appreciation and great literature, current affairs discussion groups for high-school students, and fairy tales for young children. To try to quell criticism, in 1939 the National Association of Broadcasters also adopted a set of standards for all children's programs: content should respect parents and not over-stimulate children (West, 1988). To avoid further controversy, Gordon argued that radio broadcasters gradually replaced their children's programs with adult fare: by 1941, for instance, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) had replaced almost all of its children's shows with soap operas (Gordon, 1942).

The content and issues of television

While in many ways these same concerns recur with the advent of television – too few educational programs, too few programs designed especially with children's concerns in mind, too much violence and other inappropriate content available to children and youth – the television era actually raised concerns to a new level. For example, television has provided children with unprecedented access to violent and sexual content. In addition, over the past nearly 60 years, television more than any other medium has expanded programming to children who are younger and younger, providing them with a wide range of educational and entertainment fare. Starting with the television era, then, the sheer volume of media content available to children today – both good and bad – was qualitatively different from earlier eras. Because of television, children now live in a media-saturated world.

Expansion of children's television and video programs According to Melody (1973), in 1951 there were approximately 27 hours of children's programs available weekly on the four television networks – the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and DuMont – and these were distributed throughout the broadcast week. In 1956 there were 37 hours of children's programs. It was

not until the 1960s that “kidvid” – Saturday morning animated fare directed to children – emerged on network television. The interest in consolidating children’s programs on Saturday morning was economically feasible because there was no better audience for networks to deliver to advertisers. Over time, heavy amounts of commercials (16 minutes per hour by the late 1960s) coupled with relatively cheap animated programs amortized over multiple showings proved extremely profitable for the networks (Turow, 1981). By the 1960s, the weekly hours of children’s television on the broadcast networks had declined, airing between 20 and 22 hours a week in total across the decade. In the 1970s, children’s weekly programming increased, peaking in 1970–71, 1972–3, and 1976–7 seasons when 36 hours of children’s programs aired weekly; the low of this decade was still 30 hours per week of children’s broadcasts across the three major networks in 1978.

With the advent and growth of cable television in the 1980s and 1990s, children’s television programming exploded. For example, Wartella, Heintz, Aidman, and Mazzarella (1990) conducted a study of the children’s videos, comprised of broadcast television, cable TV and video rentals, which were available in one Mid-Western community in 1987. They found a substantial increase in children’s content from that which was available in the 1970s. For four broadcast networks – ABC, NBC, CBS, and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) – they found 52 hours of children’s programs on weekdays and another 21 hours on weekends. If a family subscribed to cable television in that community, their children had access to 149 hours of additional children’s programs on weekdays and 36 hours on weekends. In total, during one week, programming created for and targeted to children under 12 in 1987 amounted to 201 hours on weekdays and 57 hours on weekends. The amount of programming today has proliferated further with several all-children’s cable channels available, including Nickelodeon, Disney, ABC Family, Noggin, and Sprout. There is even a cable channel aimed at babies, named BabyFirstTV.

Educational and prosocial media content As in earlier media eras, the television era is marked by public interest in the quality of children’s programs. Specifically calls to increase the number of educational programs and reduce violent ones continued. While there had been educational shows before 1969 such as *Ding Dong School*, *Kukla Fran and Ollie*, and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, it was the advent of *Sesame Street* in 1969 that changed the face of children’s educational television forever. *Sesame Street* demonstrated that preschool children could learn their letters, numbers, and other planned educational content from television and that such content can contribute to success in school. For example, The Early Window Project (Wright & Huston, 1995) and the Recontact Study (Anderson et al., 2001) assessed the long-term impact of educational television. The original Early Window Project tracked the effects of educational television viewing for three years on two cohorts of children, initially ages 2–5 and 4–7, from relatively low-income homes. In addition to finding positive relationships

between watching educational television and school achievement, the researchers also found that viewing planned educational television shows at ages 2 and 3 predicted higher scores at age 5 on measures of language, math, and school readiness (Wright & Huston, 1995). In a follow-up study in the 1990s when these children were teenagers (between 15 and 19 years old), gender differences favoring boys were found for long-term cognitive effects for those who viewed more educational television programs early in life (Anderson et al., 2001). In addition, both boys and girls who viewed educational television programs early in development were more creative, and positive attitudes toward learning were also found for higher educational television viewers. These findings suggest that viewing educational television programs during the preschool years sets the child on a trajectory for educational success that persists beyond the learning of letters and numbers in the preschool years. Research on prosocial content in television – teaching children to help, share, and cooperate – also emerged during the 1970s as scholars realized that children can learn constructive behaviors from viewing television (Friedrich & Stein, 1973; Mares, Palmer, & Sullivan, this volume, Chapter 12).

With the recent explosion of video products directed at infants and toddlers (Garrison & Christakis, 2005), the value of educational content has been questioned for very young children. Specifically, the American Academy of Pediatrics (1999) calls for no screen exposure for children under age 2. Although evidence is emerging that exposure to programs designed for adults is harmful to the play of children under the age of 2 (e.g., Anderson & Pempek, 2005), there is still little evidence that television content designed specifically for children under age 2 is either helpful or harmful (Barr, this volume, Chapter 7).

Violent and sexual media content While educational content can teach, so can other types of content. Since early in the last century there has been concern about violent content and its effects on children. From Münsterberg's notion that films can impress themselves on the minds of children, through Blumer's (1933) Payne Fund Studies on the ways in which film content can impress the impressionable youth, to radio concerns about violent children's fare, public concern over media violence and its effects on children and youth has recurred over the course of the twentieth century. But it has been in the past nearly 60 years of television research that media violence issues and recurring studies of violence effects have nearly colonized all studies of media and youth.

Over the past 60 years, a substantial body of research documents the effects of television violence on child viewers in the United States. Three major reviews of the literature support the conclusion that media violence contributes to aggressive behavior and aggressive attitudes as well as to desensitization and fear effects. In particular, the statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2000) declared television violence to be a public health hazard. The study of violence in American life from the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence implicated media along with other social and psychological factors as a

contributor to violence (Baker & Ball, 1969). Finally, the American Psychological Association's study (1993) implicated media violence as a cause of aggressive behavior. No study claims that viewing media violence is the *only*, nor even the most important, contributor to violent behavior. Furthermore, it is not every act of violence in the media that raises concern, nor is every child or adult affected. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that exposure to media violence contributes in significant ways to real-world aggression. The report of the American Psychological Association concluded that, "there is absolutely no doubt that those who are heavy viewers of this violence demonstrate increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior" (p. 33).

The effects of sexual televised content on children's development, though of ongoing concern, have been far less studied. As Huston, Donnerstein, and Wartella (1998) reported, there are only a handful of studies (at the time fewer than a dozen) on the effects of sexual television content on children and youth. The authors point to the political difficulties in getting funding, and the legal and ethical constraints that arise, when scholars try to study sexual material directed at underage youth.

The content and issues of interactive screen media

By the early 2000s, concern about media violence shifted from television to videogames which can be played on consoles or online. There have been congressional investigations of videogame violence. The findings are similar to those of the television studies: children can and do learn aggression from playing videogames (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson et al., 2004; Gentile & Anderson, 2006). Concern about sexual content is another recurring theme which reappeared with the introduction of Internet pornography. While sexuality has been a public issue from the early days of the movies (see the Payne Studies), the Internet allows easy access to increasingly explicit sexual content. A National Academies Panel found little research to document the effects of online pornography on youth, in part because this area cannot be studied (Thornburg & Lin, 2002). Moreover, regulatory action is virtually impossible to enforce since online boundaries are so permeable across nations that have different laws about sexually explicit content (Iannotta, this volume, Chapter 21; Thornburg & Linn, 2002).

Summary

Violence, sexuality, and the lack of educational content – and even the use of educational content too early in development – have been recurring and emerging topics of concern over the past century. The rise of television brought these concerns to new levels of interest, and the digital age has exacerbated them. With the expansion of media platforms and the proliferation of media into the homes of children, content designed just for children has increasingly become part of the media landscape. One last recurring area of concern over the past nearly

100 years of mass media, and one that has changed the face of childhood, is the ongoing commercialization of children through the media.

Commercialization of Youth through the Media

It is hard to argue that it is only since the advent of television that children and youth have been the target of advertising and marketing messages. Nonetheless, one can point to changes in advertising and marketing practices over the past 60 years that have led to an unprecedented and nearly inescapable commercialized childhood. From babies in diapers through adolescence, children and youth are constantly marketed to across media for numerous products. To say that childhood is media saturated is to say that childhood is commercialized, for the two go hand in hand in US culture.

Butsch (2000) notes that the rise of films and radio in the 1920s and 1930s was synonymous with the rise of advertising and marketing to media audiences, as well as the segmentation of that audience into groups of interest – women and youth. Starting with college students in the 1920s, the media – in this case films, radio, and magazines – catered to ever younger age cohorts of youth, selling them a distinct set of values that differed from their parent’s generation, social behaviors, clothing and hair styles, and distinct media practices (Fass, 1977). Beginning in the 1920s, social activities such as attending the movies, attending football games and other college sports, and driving and drinking at college parties were portrayed in various media. The “flapper” and the “college coed” are the images represented in the advertisements and media of the day. Businesses sold products catering to this age group including cigarettes, movies, and fashions (Wartella & Mazzarella, 1990).

With the advent of *Seventeen* magazine in 1944, a new younger market of high-school students was targeted by advertisers. The importance of high-school teenagers was presaged by several social changes. By the early 1930s, high-school attendance had increased to about 60 percent of high-school-aged students. The high school, like the colleges of the 1920s, offered a place where large groups of youth at specific ages could spend time together in activities to establish their own youth culture. Adolescents of the era were using media – movies, radio, magazines, and books – and these media set about catering to the specific needs of these teens. By the 1940s, high-school students as a group were labeled, identified, and catered to as “teenagers” and the media supported the creation of this subculture. This high-school teen culture is easily described: it is characterized by teen music (first the Bobby Soxers heartthrob Frank Sinatra in the 1940s and then rock and roll music stars like Elvis Presley in the 1950s and 1960s), teen movies (*I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, *Rock Around the Clock*), and teen hangouts (the drive-in movie and listening to top 40 radio in your cars). This teen culture is vividly captured in George Lucas’s film *American Graffiti*, which was set in 1962 in Modesto, California.

Starting in the 1960s and through the 1980s, a younger age group of youth became the focus of media and advertisers: grade-school children who were the target of kidvid Saturday morning cartoons with heavy advertising for sugar-coated cereals, snacks, and toys. Into the 1970s and 1980s, this targeting at the under-12 demographic grew substantially. The advent of the “program length commercial” occurred in the 1980s where toys became the focus of cartoon shows such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *He-Man: Masters of the Universe*. The advent of cable channels, including Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, resulted in numerous programs created just for this age group. The proliferation of advertising also occurred. New kinds of products were developed and aimed at the under-12 age group; these included more food products, clothing, and travel ads for family vacations (Wartella, 1995).

Aiding and abetting this interest in reaching the under-12 age group was the growth in the spending power of children. According to McNeal (1999), spending increased considerably from an estimated \$2.2 billion in 1968 to an estimated \$35 billion for 1999. What helped bring this about? A number of social changes in American family life occurred: (1) the decrease in the size of the average American family gave parents more money to spend on each child; (2) the increase in one-parent families led to children sharing shopping duties with their parents; (3) because more women were having babies later in life, their families had more income, and hence, more money to spend on their children; (4) the rise in two-career households where both parents worked outside the home also increased available income to spend on children; and (5) children had larger disposable incomes, making them an increasingly important target of advertisers (Wartella, 1995). By 1999, McNeal was reporting that the median age at which children first visited a retail store was two months.

From 2000 onward, we have seen an explosion of marketing to ever younger preschool children and even babies through ever more media venues and through new kinds of marketing practices. Branded products are now part of many preschools, including their very books (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006). Advertising via cable channels aimed at preschoolers has also expanded. The under-2 age group is no longer left out of media programmers’ or advertisers’ sights. Marketing to children has reached far beyond television and far beyond the traditional television spots for toys, snack food, and cereal products. Indeed, the proliferation of commercial messages is now everywhere for children to see at virtually any time. The Internet and other interactive technologies are, in part, a reason for this increasingly long arm of marketers.

As the Internet swiftly moved into American homes in the 1990s, the youth marketing enterprise intensified and expanded its efforts (Montgomery, 2007). When the World Wide Web was launched in 1993, children already were positioned in the center of a burgeoning media marketplace, with a full array of brands tailored exclusively to their needs – from specialized television channels to magazines to music. In the ensuing dot-com boom, the value of youth in the new digital marketplace became even greater. As Montgomery (2007) writes:

All the ingredients were in place to create a highly commercial digital-media culture, with unprecedented access to the child consumer. The dramatic crash of the overhyped online market did little to stop the flow of the new media into young people's lives. As a consequence, the Digital Generation has become the most heavily researched demographic group in the history of marketing. (p. 25)

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study (Moore, 2006) of online marketing to children, advertisers who advertise on television also advertise online. Marketing to children now occurs across an increasingly integrated commercialized media environment including television, radio, Internet, videogame, cell phone, and digital devices such as iPods (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006). Calvert (in press) documents the movement from practices such as the traditional commercial advertisements to newer, increasingly stealth techniques. One of these newer practices is *product placement* where the product is embedded in videogame, television, film, or DVD content. For instance, nearly three quarters of the Internet sites examined in the Kaiser Family Foundation study (Moore, 2006) used "advergaming," online games featuring a company's product or characters such as Tony the Tiger or Barbie dolls. *Viral marketing*, where popular youth spread the word and are often given free products to increase other youths' interest in, and purchases of, that product, is another emerging practice. For example, popular youth are often given branded clothing, such as Nike sports and athletic gear, in exchange for wearing, and thereby promoting, the Nike brand (Calvert, forthcoming). A third emerging approach is *integrated marketing campaigns* where the product occurs across multiple venues, such as free merchandise being given with product purchases at a restaurant that is linked to a current film (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006). For example, the Sponge Bob Square Pants movie was associated with companies such as the Burger King fast food restaurant chain where Sponge Bob Square Pants toys were given for food purchases.

While marketing has reached unprecedented levels to ever younger age groups of children, there is no evidence that children are better able to make sense of these messages today than were earlier generations. Since the 1970s, research conducted on the impact of television advertising on children has yielded consistent findings: children under 8 are less able to understand persuasive intent (i.e., that advertisers want to sell you the product) than are older children and adolescents (Young, this volume, Chapter 18). According to Roberts (1982) the understanding of persuasive intent requires that a child initially recognize the source of the advertising message, and recognize that the advertiser has a perspective and an interest that is different from that of the child. The child must then understand that advertisers want consumers to buy their product, and therefore, the message may be biased in favor of the advertiser. Consequently, making sense of advertising messages, especially on television and perhaps other screen media, requires different and more sophisticated strategies than making sense of other

content. The blurry lines between commercial and program content used in the newer stealth marketing practices may make it even more difficult for children to discriminate the commercials from the surrounding content. At present, there has been relatively little research conducted on children's understanding of these emerging marketing practices, particularly in the newer interactive media. Because of these age-based limitations, the American Psychological Association recently recommended that no advertising be directed to children under age 8 (Kunkel et al., 2004).

Exposure to television advertising can lead to harmful outcomes for children. Indeed, television advertising has been implicated as one source of the increased levels of obesity in US culture. In a systematic review of the effects of food advertising on childhood obesity, an Institute of Medicine committee (McGinnis, Gootman, & Kraak, 2006) found television advertising effects on children's food preferences, food choices, and short-term food consumption. Although there was a positive correlation between food advertising and adiposity (i.e., children's body fatness), the committee could not rule out all other alternative explanations. Based on the overall evidence, the report concluded that food marketing practices are implicated in the rise of childhood obesity. One recommendation of the committee was that marketers and media programmers take a more balanced approach about what kinds of foods are advertised and marketed to children as one step in trying to combat the childhood obesity crisis. Put simply, the high caloric and low nutritional value of the foods advertised to children on television are out of balance with a healthy diet and with healthy children.

Conclusion

Over the past 100 or so years during the rise of mass and now digital media, the role of these media in children's lives has been a recurring focus of the media industry, a concerned public, and social science researchers. While one might argue that nothing new has occurred, that does not truly capture the remarkable inroads media have made in influencing the context of how children develop in American life. Most especially, since the advent of television about 60 years ago, American children live and grow from infancy onward in a world dominated by media. The introduction of the Internet and other digital technologies into children's homes has further exacerbated the effects of screen media on the lives of youth. The real import of children living and growing in a media-saturated environment is only rudimentarily understood. We know far too little about the role that media play in developmental outcomes. The knowledge base is particularly lacking in terms of documented long-term consequences of exposure to violent, sexual, and commercialized screen content, or of the still untapped potential of media to foster long-term social and academic success. Plus la même chose, plus ça change!

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