The medium and the message

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Leonie Rutherford on the media, cultural literacy and healthy life habits.

There is a popular tendency to attribute a great deal, if not most, of the ills associated with young people and social change to the pernicious influence of the media. Many media scholars and cultural commentators deplore this tendency as a historically predictable series of moral panics, and they point to the complex web of factors contributing to children’s cognitive, health and social outcomes.

Conversely, contemporary children are often popularly, and romantically depicted as digital natives, pre-shaped by a technology-enhanced environment with an unprecedented ability to master emergent digital literacies. These media-savvy children are equipped to safely negotiate the perils of media marketing and frivolous or even dangerous programs and online content. Pornography and recruitment of young children as consumers through branding strategies and viral marketing are often cited as dangers associated with contemporary media institutions.

So is media content and the conditions of its use irrelevant to educational and health outcomes for children, or can media-specific interventions by educators, parents and regulators make a difference to Australian children’s longterm wellbeing?

It is now clearly understood that there is a link between the way children spend their time in early childhood and developmental outcomes. Social and intellectual development is more malleable than in later years, it is suggested, because there may be more family and individual variability in how children’s lives are scheduled than once they begin to attend school.

Yet surprisingly little research about media is undertaken with very young children. Recently the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) commissioned a review of research on young children and media (0-6 years), and is now seeking comment on its findings from educators and other members of the public. Some themes and topics to emerge from this review include changing patterns of media use by young children, educational outcomes associated with media use, and the links between media consumption and rising levels of obesity.

Media use and developmental outcomes

Research on the media practices of teens and older children, such as social media use and the creation of user-generated content, is often assumed to apply equally well to the experience of preschoolers. Internet use, it is often claimed, has rendered traditional media irrelevant to young people. Yet Australian statistics indicate that television is still the most pervasive and prevalent type of media in use across all age groups. In very young children, the bias towards older types of electronic media is more clear.

A recent Australian Communications and Media Authority report found that television (94 per cent) and DVD/video (91 per cent) are the most commonly used media among three and four-year-old Australian children, with computer and internet usage less common (40 per cent) and electronic games the least used (16 per cent). The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), a nationally representative study, indicates that four-year-old children watch an average of 2.3 hours of television on weekdays, and 2.2 hours on weekend days, while computer use by three and four year olds amounted to an average of only seven minutes per day. Children’s time use diaries from the LSAC also show that “television/video/DVD watching” is the activity that occupies most of children’s play time.

Given the amount of time young children spend with television and other electronic media, it is important to consider how this might affect their outcomes, compared with time spent with print media. Some international studies find that more television viewing is associated with lower academic achievement as measured by scores on standardized tests, although there are observable age and gender differences. On the other hand, robust links have been found between the amount of time children spend reading and academic achievement.

Discouragingly, a consistent finding in the literature when we consider national populations is that educational advantage and disadvantage tend to be replicated across generations. Parents with higher levels of education and income have
children who spend less time watching television and more time reading and on other cognitively valuable activities, such as singing and being talked to. This suggests that family support of various kinds—time, knowledge, skilled interaction, and ability to purchase educational resources—is a crucial mechanism in developing children’s social, traditional print, and digital literacies.

Time, however, is not the only character in the story. Types of screen media content matter. While infants have been found to learn new words better from their adult caregivers than from screen media, and to repeat learned tasks after a live demonstration better than from a televised one, in the case of children over two years of age, the content of the program being watched appears to be more critical than the act of watching itself.

Some Australian research indicates that child informative programs are positively associated with both pretend play and outdoor play, while US studies conclude that educational television has a substantial positive influence on children’s educational achievement. Age-appropriate television programs of educational value are widely considered beneficial to the development and wellbeing of even very young children. However, the question of whether print-based informative media is more influential than educational electronic media has yet to be established.

The media and children’s health

While psychologists and children’s health specialists formerly looked keenly at social learning from media, together with the cognitive and behavioural effects of violence, an increasing amount of research is now being conducted into links between media use and obesity. This is fuelled by increasing public concern about a perceived obesity epidemic, particularly rising rates of BMI and overweight in preschool children.

In the decade between 1985 and 1995, the energy intake of Australian children increased by 12 per cent girls and 15 per cent for boys. Some researchers explain this as occasioned by a rise in consumption of foods such as confectionary, cakes, biscuits and other high-sugar foods, and take-away. While this level of energy intake has held steady for children since then, the effects, in terms of a generation prone to obesity and overweight persist.

Obesity is clearly influenced by many factors: overall energy intake, amount of exercise, family dietary culture and genetic factors. However, nationally representative surveys in Australia and internationally show a consistent link with overall screen time and levels of obesity in children. Results from the ‘Longitudinal Study of Australian Children’ show increasing amounts of screen time and levels of obesity and overweight in young children through each wave of data collection from 2004 to 2008.

There is some debate about what the precise pathway that links screen time with increased BMI might be. One theory suggests that it is the increase in sedentary behaviour that is the culprit, while another, which is gaining ground, identifies the advertisements for high-fat, high-sugar foods on commercial television as the crucial mechanism.

With this in mind, the report of the government’s National Preventative Health Taskforce ‘Healthy Australia 2020’ recommended a total ban on junk food advertisements on commercial free to air and pay television before 9pm in the evenings. The Department of Health and Ageing’s response, released with the recent budget papers, rejected this recommendation, instead favouring a combination of industry co-regulatory initiatives, with previously announced spending on a dedicated digital children’s channel on the, commercial-free, ABC.

While time spent with electronic media may be only one of many factors shaping children’s social learning, cultural literacy, and healthy life habits, research clearly indicates that it is one to which we should pay attention. Media education and rule setting may also be means through which educators and parents can choose to make interventions to increase children’s chances of getting a healthy and prosperous start to life.

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