



## Mediated childhoods : a comparative approach to young people's changing media environment in Europe

Sonia Livingstone

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

**Cite this version:**

Livingstone, S. (1998). Mediated childhoods : a comparative approach to young people's changing media environment in Europe [online]. London: LSE Research Online.

Available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/archive/00000401>

This is an electronic version of an Article published in the European Journal of Communication 13(4) pp. 435-456 © 1998 SAGE Publications  
<http://ejc.sagepub.com/>

# **Mediated childhoods: A comparative approach to young people's changing media environment in Europe**

Sonia Livingstone  
Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology  
Media Research Group  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE  
UK  
Tel 0171 955 7710  
Fax 0171 955 7565  
Email [s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk)

## *Acknowledgements*

This article draws on a research project '*Children, Young People and the Changing Media Environment*' directed by the author in collaboration with George Gaskell and Moira Bovill at LSE. The British project, conducted in association with the Broadcasting Standards Commission, is supported financially by the Advertising Association, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, British Telecommunications plc., the Independent Television Association, the Independent Television Commission, the Leverhulme Trust and Yorkshire/Tyne Tees Television. The multinational project, directed by S. Livingstone and G. Gaskell at LSE, is supported financially by the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Youth for Europe Programme (EC-DGXXII), and the European Science Foundation. The author would like to thank Jay Blumler, Kirsten Drotner, Johan Fornas, Peter Lunt, Dominique Pasquier, Bo Reimer, David Scott and the participants in the European research project for their constructive discussion of an earlier version of this paper.

**Mediated childhoods:  
A comparative approach to young people's  
changing media environment in Europe**

**Abstract**

This *Special Issue* presents work-in-progress from a substantial cross-national project investigating the diffusion and significance of media and information technologies among young people aged 6-17 years old living in twelve European countries - Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Israel<sup>1</sup>, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. As described in this article, the project has brought together multidisciplinary teams to develop a common conceptual and methodological framework with which to explore cultural variations in media use. This framework stresses the importance of first, contextualising 'new' media in relation to both pre-existing media practices and the broader contexts of young people's lives, second, of drawing on and contributing to the integration of childhood, youth and media studies, and third, of theorising contexts of media use in relation to processes of modernisation. Thus we link young people's media uses to the shifting boundary between public and private, the changing relation between social determination and individualisation of the life world, and processes of globalization and consumerism. This article also introduces the cross-national basis of the project and outlines its objectives and design. The other articles in this *Special Issue* present initial comparative findings on European children and young people's changing media environments.

**Keywords**

Children and Young People, Media Environment, New Media, Modernity,  
Comparative Research

---

<sup>1</sup>While Israel is not part of Europe, it was included to strengthen the representation of Mediterranean countries (it is linked to the European Commission for scientific purposes).

**Mediated childhoods:  
A comparative approach to young people's  
changing media environment in Europe**

**Developing a research agenda**

Two eight year old boys play their favourite multimedia adventure game on the family PC. When they discover an Internet site where the same game could be played interactively with unknown others, this occasions great excitement in the household. The boys choose their fantasy personae, and try diverse strategies to play the game, both cooperative and competitive, simultaneously 'talking' on-line (i.e. writing) to the other participants. But when restricted in their access to the Internet, for reasons of cost, the game spins off into 'real life'. Now the boys, together with their younger sisters, choose a character, don their battle dress and play 'the game' all over the house, going downstairs to Hell, The Volcanoes and The Labyrinth, and upstairs to The Town, 'improving' the game in the process. This new game is called, confusingly for adult observers, 'playing the Internet'.

This episode raises a host of questions concerning children and young people's engagement with media, many of which are addressed by this *Special Issue*. How do different media relate to each other: do some media displace others or depend on others; what determines interest in and selection of particular texts? How do the media fit into broader social contexts of leisure and, for children, into social contexts of play and learning? Are these media relations and social contexts themselves undergoing social change, and does this change give rise to new opportunities and dangers for young people and their families? Is it still meaningful to distinguish between non-mediated and mediated leisure, as media reception merges with face-to-face interaction? What is the significance of virtual or fantasy participation in mediated interaction? And what are the consequences of inequalities in media access/use for social participation? Finally, given that adult and child perspectives diverge, how should all of this be researched?

The comparative project, *Children, Young People and the Changing Media Environment*, whose work-in-progress is reported in this *Special Issue*, takes its inspiration from

Himmelweit et al's seminal study, *Television and the Child* (1958). That study examined many possible effects of television on children's lives following its introduction in Britain during the 1950s, informing policy makers and parents as well as setting the agenda for research on children and television for decades to come. In the 1990s new forms of media are entering the lives of children and young people around Europe and research is again needed. As in that earlier study, we have conceptualised the likely impacts of new media as diverse but interconnected, requiring a broad-based description of media meanings, uses and impacts in their everyday social context together with a research design which facilitates comparisons between those with and without certain media and according to demographic or lifestyle categories. Researching 'new media' means studying a moving target. In selecting the video recorder, multiple television channels, the personal computer, video games and the Internet for study, we assume that the electronic screen (which now encompasses broadcasting, print and computing) will remain central to the changing media environment. Within this, however, we recognise that new media may be defined in terms of technology (interactivity; digitalisation; the convergence of telecommunication/ broadcasting/ computing), in terms of services (especially the convergence of information/ entertainment/ education/ commerce), in terms of social diffusion and globalization processes, in terms of textual forms (genre hybridities; non-linear fiction; interactive audiences) and in terms of historical changes in social and cultural practices (Livingstone et al, 1997; Silverstone, 1997).

Having to resolve the question of "what's new" represents one of several differences between Himmelweit's study and the present research, highlighting ways in which new media - as well as the intervening forty years of research - raise new challenges (Livingstone and Gaskell, 1995). A second difference concerns the move away from questions of 'effect' to questions of meaning and use. This is in response to the sustained critique of the effects tradition (Livingstone, 1996) as well as to the practical impossibility of constructing a before-and-after research design given that multiple forms of media are gradually diffusing through society. Thus the shift from 'television' to 'the media environment' is significant: describing media access in the 1990s means mapping complex combinations of diverse media, and both the determinants and consequences of these combinations are of interest (e.g. Johnsson-Smaragdi et al, *this volume*). Broadening the project to encompass cross-national comparisons, however, allows some possibility for before-and-after, and have-and-have-not, comparisons.

This paper will argue that the focus on television viewing as a cause in children's lives is productively replaced by an enterprise which contextualises media use - particularly new media use - within a broad analysis of children and young people's life worlds, including their use of traditional media. This shift is consonant with the recent attempt to open up audience studies by assuming more active, interpretative and participatory modes of engagement between audiences and media. However, mapping media environments, charting their determinants and consequences, and investigating diverse modes of audience engagement - all requires a wider variety of research traditions than informed *Television and the Child*. This is reflected in the multidisciplinary of the European research teams, including developmental and social psychology, cultural and sociological studies of childhood and youth, media uses and gratifications, the sociology of leisure/consumption, diffusion research and reception studies.

The awkward absence of a single term to cover our age range, extended to cover 6 to 17 years, signals a further difference - between 'the child' and 'children and young people' in the titles of Himmelweit et al and the present project. The post-1950s emergence of youth culture, among other factors, has led to childhood and youth as connected but distinct (and separately theorised) phenomena. One challenge is to span analyses of both childhood and youth in researching the new media. The complementary challenge is to reveal the role played by the media in childhood and youth. Researchers in media studies hardly need persuading of the mediated nature of childhood and youth. But curiously perhaps, the sociology of childhood neglects this aspect of children's lives<sup>2</sup> - whether because its aim is to emphasise the cultures which children create for themselves or because of an implicitly elitist rejection of the media as uninteresting or unimportant. The rethought sociological child-as-agent (rather than child-as-object or child-as-outcome of social processes) lives a nonmediated childhood - a carefree child playing hopscotch with friends in a nearby park, not a child with music on the headphones watching television in her bedroom. Child psychology does acknowledge the media, but mainly in relation to cognitive development, and much of it remains, problematically, wedded to the effects tradition. More influential links exist between youth studies and media studies (e.g. Drotner, 1996; Fornas and Bolin, 1994), although these are often narrowly focussed on certain media (e.g. music) or certain aspects of audiences (e.g.

---

<sup>2</sup>Taking Qvortrup (1995), James et al (1998) and Corsaro (1997) as indicative of this new approach to childhood, it is notable that none considers the media in any detail, if at all.

countercultures, resistance) to the neglect of other, more widespread and more ordinary media uses.

To sum up the guiding assumptions of our project-in-progress, we first contextualise new media in relation to older media, exploring uses of Internet and multimedia while not neglecting magazines, music or national television. The point is to complement - even to argue against - studies of separate media<sup>3</sup>. Changes in the media environment both add to the leisure options and may also transform the meanings of older media; conversely, it is the social practices established for older media which set the parameters within which new media are appropriated into daily life. Second, we draw on research on children - itself divided into psychological, developmental studies of 'the child' and sociological studies of 'childhood' - and research on youth and youth culture. Researching across this age range allows us to work towards the integration of these different research traditions, to explore the transition from childhood and youth<sup>4</sup>, and to analyse childhood and youth within a unitary framework, for example investigating the common perception that characteristics of youth (e.g. the move towards independence, individualisation and self-identity, engagement with consumer culture) are increasingly characteristic of younger children. A third guiding assumption is that media research needs more work specifically on children and youth: most media research focuses on adults, the family or the household as if the life world of young people may be either assumed from or simply tacked onto an existing knowledge of adult society. Yet sociological and cultural studies of these age groups have been motivated by the recognition that childhood and youth are not simply stages through which individuals pass but are sociological phenomena in their own right, neither prior to nor separate from society as a

---

<sup>3</sup>Previous research has tended to produce diverse but discrete studies - gender and the computer at school, heavy users of video games, soap opera viewers, children's understanding of the distinction between reality and fantasy, teenagers' music subcultures - while other areas of media uses are unaccountably neglected - reading books for pleasure (Boëthius, 1995) or counter-stereotyped media uses (girls as sports fans, boys as soap opera fans) - depending on the vagaries of academic fashion.

<sup>4</sup>The age range studied is, of course, bisected by the transition from primary to secondary education. This occurs at somewhat different ages in different European countries and may be expected to have consequences in itself for leisure experience. To maximise comparability across national studies we selected the following age breaks: 6-7 years (in most countries, the first year of school, though the third year in Britain and Netherlands), 9-10 (one or two years before the end of primary school for most countries), 12-13 (typically the first year of secondary school, with some exceptions) and 15-16 (in most cases the last, or penultimate year of compulsory education). About half of the national studies in fact included all years, and for comparisons involving these countries, the age breaks 6-8, 9-11, 12-14 and 15-17 are used.

whole.<sup>5</sup> Compared with the high levels of public concern over children and young people's use of new media, little research considers this group specifically - with notable exceptions from the cultural studies tradition (Buckingham, 1993; Kinder, 1991; Seiter, 1993). For certain media and certain European countries, research is particularly sparse.

### **Locating media use in the context of everyday life**

The idea of context provides a point of departure. On a descriptive level, our objective is to produce systematic and detailed accounts of the place of new media in childhood and youth. More theoretically, various approaches have been used to capture the idea of context, including those of social ecology, the social environment and the field. These direct us towards investigating the societal and social psychological ordering - or transformation - of practices, opportunities and problems for children, young people and their families in everyday life. Thus we consider 'new' media in the context of older media, media use in the context of leisure, and leisure in the context of children and young people's life world. The life world is itself conceptualised in terms of the expanding circles - the home, the school, the peer group, the community locale, the nation, the globe. Yet one can easily get lost describing the myriad details of particular media uses in different contexts by specific categories of children or young people, and conversely, in conducting comparative research, one must be wary of generating numerous 'facts' - such as amount of time children spend watching television in different European countries - while forgetting their contexts. For example, while the findings emerging from our comparative project indicate that countries differ substantially in the amount of television viewed, our stress on 'environment' leads us to attempt to contextualise these by documenting access to diverse media (and the policies which regulate them), disposable leisure time (including length of school day, bedtime conventions, child care practices), available places for leisure (including typical house size, public provision for leisure facilities, transport arrangements), and other significant aspects of young people's lives around Europe (family structure, patterns of parental employment, national languages, degree of urbanisation, education system, and so forth). As noted above, such an investigation requires a multidisciplinary study.

---

<sup>5</sup>More problematically, the concomitant critique of the concept of socialisation results in an under-theorisation of age and development, and thus the present project draws on developmental psychology as well as the sociology of childhood (e.g. Suess et al, *this volume*).



Without such contextualisation, research on children and young people tends to transform the positives and negatives of their lives into positive and negative children or young people, particularly negative ones (- the Internet addict, the screen-zombie, the social isolate). Similarly, without contextualisation research tends to pit 'old' media against 'new' media, failing to recognise the complex ways in which they are mutually entangled in everyday life. Furthermore, contextualisation counters the tendency towards technological determinism evident within the literature on new media. Despite a widely shared sense of technological change, in which the screen in the family home is seen as the future site of a new multimedia culture integrating telecommunications, broadcasting, computing and video, researchers have learned to be sceptical of the assumption that social change follows equally rapidly (e.g. Miles et al, 1987; Silverstone, 1997). It is far from obvious whether playing Power Rangers in the playground is significantly new or just a new variant on an age-old form of children's play. Similarly, while adolescents have retreated to their bedroom for privacy for as long as there have been adolescents with a room of their own, it is not obvious how much this experience is affected by their now having their own television set.<sup>6</sup> While new technologies are developed, entering the households of early adopters in part according to a technological agenda, more widespread use depends on their appropriation into pre-existing systems of meanings and practices (Neuman, 1991; Rogers, 1986; Schoenbach and Becker, 1989; Silverstone and Hirsch; 1992). Not only are these much slower to change, but their investigation demands a more user-centred - here a child-centred - focus.<sup>7</sup>

Approaching the contexts of media use through a child-centred focus is readily compatible with a cultural, constructionist approach to childhood and youth. Through his contextualised analysis within the sociology of childhood of the micro-workings of peer culture, Corsaro (1997) shows how the everyday activities of children reveal their participation in the

---

<sup>6</sup>To the extent that new media open up new opportunities or dangers, today's parents, teachers and researchers may be the least appropriate people to drive the research questions: this generation is in the exceptional but temporary position of lacking the meaning-making frames of both the early adopters who have followed the development of technologies and their children who have grown up with 'new' media (Livingstone et al, 1997).

<sup>7</sup>Schoenbach and Becker (1989) surveyed the impact on households of media introduced in the 1980s (VCR and cable/satellite television) across a variety of Western countries. They found little evidence of a reduction in time spent on non-media leisure, little evidence of reduction in time or money spent on print and auditory media, consistent evidence for increasing specialisation in uses of all media, not just the new ones, and no evidence that new media create new audience interests, although they may provide new means of satisfying existing interests.

production and reproduction of society. Drawing on Goffman's (1961) notion of secondary adjustments, Corsaro stresses that through such daily actions, often invisible to adult eyes, children contribute to the construction of social structures which have consequences for both children and adults. To develop my earlier example of children's play, the point would be that it is only from the viewpoint of - indeed only as a result of the activities of - the children playing the game that connections are created among a computer game, the Internet, dressing up, playing with friends, redefining personal space, the negotiation of gender appropriate roles, and parental regulation or facilitation of play. The daily practices which generate these connections mediate social relations within the family and peer group and have consequences for the space-time patterning of leisure.

In their everyday lives children and young people weave together a huge diversity of activities. This interconnection across activities may be deliberate, as in the intertextual integration of content themes across diverse media forms (e.g. Disney fans; see Drotner, 1998). Or it may be more or less accidental (as when a child's leisure alters if a best friend moves in next door). The leisure environment affords access to certain kinds of activities and interconnections among activities, depending on social arrangements of time, space, cultural norms and values and personal preferences and lifestyle. Within these arrangements, children and young people (and their families) construct their own local contexts and it is within these that media use becomes meaningful (Qvortrup, 1995). Moreover, every choice is made meaningful by its mutual relation with all others: watching television means something different to the child with nothing else to do compared with the child who has a PC at home or friends knocking on the door. Thus conditions of access and choice within the child's environment are central to an understanding of the meanings of media use.

The point of a child-centred, constructivist approach is to argue that children and young people - both individually and as a market - not only respond to but also influence changes in their immediate environment, including their mediated environment. This argument can be developed to suggest that children and young people should be researched not only because they represent an audience neglected by the adult-centred focus on households as the unit of new media consumption but also because their uses of and experiences with new media are of specific analytical relevance to media theory. Children and young people represent the early users of new media (households with children lead in terms of media diffusion); possibly

they are more flexible or creative users (having fewer already-established patterns and routines of daily life; indeed, their main pattern is already that of change or development over time); they lack the conceptual baggage of many adults which leads them to fear new technologies and, more generally, the future; and lastly, research on youth in particular has shown us that while the media often serve as the very currency through which identities are constructed, social relations negotiated and peer culture generated (- for adults this is more likely to be provided by work).

### **Contexts of everyday life in a time of social change**

In effect, we can conceptualise childhood and youth as themselves representing key contexts for media use - as occupying times and spaces whose contours are themselves part of wider trends. These trends are widely debated within social theory; and while claims for a radical break with tradition are overstated, any analysis of media use-in-context must consider these broader trends. Various authors (e.g. Reimer, 1995; Ziehe, 1994) have commented on the trend within western societies towards a separation of social structure and lifestyles. It is quite a task to map how far patterns of media use depend on traditional socio-structural distinctions (especially, social class divisions, traditional collective solidarities and standardised family structures). Yet to the extent that we are witnessing a shift away from, or a loosening of, the determining role of such distinctions, there are significant consequences for media research. For example, one can no longer presume a knowledge of media use from a knowledge of these distinctions (Reimer, 1995), giving a new twist to the notion of info-rich and info-poor households. It would seem that multiple factors lie behind media acquisition, including variation in both economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and in many European countries at least, acquisition of many leisure technologies is inversely related to socioeconomic status, although early adoption of IT is a middle class phenomenon (see van der Voort et al, *this volume*). Thus, the fluidity of contemporary links between social structure and lifestyles invites investigation of the place of the media in relation to each: instead of asking how traditional socio-demographic factors determine patterns of media use, research should also investigate processes of social participation or exclusion in society as a result of differential access to new forms of media or culture.

How should this new fluidity be thought of? Beck (1992) argues that the trend described above is not only away from traditional social formations but towards the individualisation of social life - he stresses the diversification and individualisation of life worlds and life styles which, potentially, introduce both new opportunities and new dangers. Applying this to the analysis of childhood, Buchner (1990: p.77-8) argues that:

'every child is increasingly expected to behave in an "individualised way"... children must somehow orient themselves to an *anticipated* life course. The more childhood in the family is eclipsed by influences and orientation patterns from outside the family (...) the more independent the opportunity (and drive) to making up one's own mind, making one's own choice...described here as the *biographization* of the life course'.

Clearly childhood and youth is a key period for the construction of the self or identity, as young people are preoccupied with making the transition from their family of origin towards a wider peer culture (see Suess et al, *this volume*). As traditional structures, at all levels from the family to the nation state, which confer identity are being undermined, others are actively sought by young people, and these are readily provided by the market. The integration of individualisation and consumerism is also an increasingly globally structured process, transcending national boundaries. This makes for a heady context within which young people seek to construct a meaningful life project which is more or less shared with their peers, conceived locally and globally, in actuality and virtually (Ziehe, 1994). However, against this context of new opportunities one should stress also the transformation of leisure culture into promotional culture as modern marketing directs flows of popular culture, identity is refashioned through consumption and the citizen (or viewer) is transformed into the consumer (e.g. Kinder, 1991). Clearly, whether conceived optimistically or pessimistically, the processes of globalization of media and culture are seen by many as the means *par excellence* by which such social changes are effected - for the detachment of meanings from their contexts of production is central to the conditions of late modernity, opening up possibilities for new contexts of consumption as market processes are increasingly freed (or refashioned) to infuse the life world of the family (Lash and Urry, 1994).

The analysis of individualisation has implications both for the importance of media in everyday life and for our analysis of children and young people in terms of their autonomy

versus their integration into social networks (whether traditional or new). Integrating these concerns raises questions about the role of media in the (possibly) changing balance between the relative independence or dependence of young people on their family, with implications in turn for policies informed by protectionism or liberalism.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the individualisation thesis offers a historical account of the sociology of childhood as itself one outcome of a lengthy process of social change in which children, traditionally subordinated by or excluded from civic society, are repositioned as citizens in a democratic society and as partners within the home.<sup>9</sup> Changing patterns of media-related activities may have some very concrete consequences for the use of social space - in terms of the boundary between public and private, both within the community and within the household (Meyrowitz, 1985). At the level of community, research is needed to determine whether the information technologies in particular represent a means of social inclusion, with civic and cultural opportunities denied to those without access, or, perhaps, they represent an invitation to young people to withdraw from traditional leisure activities and, as a consequence, from social and political participation. At the level of the household, Giddens (1993) suggests that we are seeing 'a democratisation of the private sphere' (p.184). Through the historical transformation of intimacy, children - like any other participants to a relationship - have gained the right to 'determine and regulate the conditions of their association' (p.185); and parents have gained the duty to protect them from coercion, ensure their involvement in key decisions, be accountable to them and others and to respect and expect respect.

Arguably, we are witnessing contradictory trends - both towards the autonomy of children, domestic democracy and individualisation of childhood and towards increased regulation and risk management of children by adults. Rather than interpreting these as contrary trends towards independence and dependence respectively, Rose (1990) suggests that childhood is

---

<sup>8</sup>For example, in charting patterns of television use by the family from 1950-90, Andreasen (1994) suggests that the shift from family co-viewing towards individual viewing was facilitated both by technological developments - the purchase of multiple sets, the individualising effects of multi-channel cable television and of the remote control, and by the emergence of more democratic families with nontraditional views about parent-child power relations.

<sup>9</sup>Various kinds of support exist for this 'democratisation' of childhood, from historical accounts (following Aries, 1962) to international policy (notably, the UN Children's Committee concerned with Article 12 of the UN Convention of Human Rights which stresses the need to respect and listen to children, to act in the child's best interests, and not to discriminate against children). In England, the Children Act 1989 marked the shift from treating children as the passive objects of parental rights to being treated as legal subjects in their own right.

undergoing more a process of bureaucratization than of democratisation, through a combination of strategies which constrain children's participation in public while capturing their private, individual world of identity and agency.<sup>10</sup> The ways in which the media particularly become caught up in these processes remain to be disentangled. If there is a new responsibility to construct an explicit project of the self<sup>11</sup> in socially regulated and approved ways - and for ever younger children - the media may play a part in both facilitating and undermining this process, as perceived by parents, teachers and children/young people. Moreover, the anxieties produced by these changes tend to lead many to hold new forms of media directly responsible, together with the globalization and consumerism which accompany them. While one can bracket off these anxieties as a sociological phenomenon with their own history and conditions of existence (Drotner, 1992), it is also the case that they not only reflect but also affect the social reproduction of childhood and patterns of media consumption.

### **Children, young people and the media environment across Europe**

Contexts of media use have been elaborated in this paper in two main ways. First, differences in social, cultural, economic and political structures both across and within European countries are likely to make a difference to children and young people's media use. Second, among western countries these structures are themselves subject to broader processes of modernisation, processes which have particular significance for young people. For both these reasons, comparisons across different European countries will be invaluable to the contextualising of media use by children and young people. To the extent that different countries represent different positions on these broad structural variables, including the diffusion and appropriation of media, comparative analysis offers a kind of natural experiment for explaining the meanings, uses and impacts of new media within each country.

---

<sup>10</sup>The contrary trends lead to paradoxes such as the way in which 'play and spontaneity have also become parts of the curriculum of nursery schools' Qvortrup, (1995:195); in Britain we have noted the apparent coincidence of parental restriction of children's access to public spaces and their liberal provision of media within the private domain of the child's bedroom (Livingstone et al, 1997). Rose's resolution is to argue that the more there is talk of children's rights, children's participation and children as agents, the more also is society moved to regulate the conditions of this participation.

<sup>11</sup>"The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens, 1991: 5).

To make such comparisons manageable in practice, the research should be restricted to modernised, western countries which are undergoing related socio-political changes;<sup>12</sup> over-large national differences would prevent observations interesting in one country being informative for another.

The purpose of comparative analysis is to improve the understanding of both one's own country and the countries with which comparison is made (Chisholm, 1995). In the context of developing European Union policy on a variety of fronts, comparative analysis also informs our understanding of European culture and society. Thus, by comparing a sizeable group of countries, broadly comparable in degree of modernisation and global positioning, we hope to illuminate the ways in specific dimensions of comparison (demographic, cultural and media-related) across European countries underpin the meanings and impacts of old and new media. To make the comparisons valuable, we must - counter intuitively perhaps - beware of excessive caution. Chisholm (1995:22) notes that a sensitivity to the difficulties of comparative analysis invites the adoption of a relativist framework which contends that 'societies and cultures are fundamentally non-comparable and certainly cannot be evaluated against each other'. The resulting 'Tower of Babel' turns research into a collection of interesting 'facts' which participants and observers must work hard to draw valuable lessons. We have attempted to avoid the babble of non-comprehending voices by working within a broadly shared theoretical framework, rather than putting together, *post hoc*, different projects using noncomparable concepts and methods.

Within Europe there are marked differences in the structures of childhood and these affect the time-space relations of young people's media use. Age is a useful marker of social difference: for example, in Finland a seven year old is expected to be able to go to school and then return home to look after him/herself until a parent finishes work; in Britain and France both moral and welfare considerations make this unacceptable, with implications for parents' work practices, child care provision, urban planning and leisure. Within Europe, there are also marked differences in media provision - especially but not solely with respect to newer forms of media - the Internet, home computing, multiple television channels and personal media goods. It is clear from the comparative project that these differences do not simply depend on

---

<sup>12</sup>Even among western countries, certain factors - such as the strength of the public broadcasting tradition - are especially characteristic of Europe countries.

national wealth or other straightforward socioeconomic indicators, but rather both reflect and affect structures of childhood and youth at all levels from domestic practices to national policy.

Within this broad orientation, a number of approaches can be taken when making cross-national comparisons. Perhaps the simplest approach explores hypothesised universal themes within diverse national contexts. The widespread social significance of gender in framing meanings and practices of media consumption would be an example, and in this case the results of comparative analysis might qualify the apparently universal features of gender according to their inflection in different cultural meaning systems (developmental trajectories provide another example; see Suess et al, *this volume*). A somewhat different approach would identify dimensions of cross-cultural difference - such as variations in family structure, or national wealth, or linguistic uniformity/diversity, asking what consequences this has for media use in each nation (see Pasquier et al, *this volume*). A third approach, more technologically led, starts with the provision of media in each country and asks about either or both of the determinants and the implications of differential patterns of media diffusion across Europe. As noted above, an example might be the sizeable variations in children's access to the Internet (and the different government and educational policies which in part determine this) and the consequences for children's access, meanings and use of the Internet both at home and in school (see van der Voort et al and Johnsson-Smaragdi et al, *this volume*).

A fourth and final approach would hold that as Europe is subject to the conditions of late modernity, cultural variations in the processes of individualisation, globalization, privatisation and consumerism would have implications for the contexts within which different media are appropriated by different groups of children and young people (e.g. Buchner et al, 1995; Lemish et al, *this volume*). Earlier, we have suggested that the emergence of 'bedroom culture' can be examined in this way (Livingstone et al, 1997). The observation that British children more than other European children own personalised media (e.g. two thirds have a television in their bedroom) seems to be a matter neither of societal diffusion of media nor of cultural differences in religion, language or wealth. Rather, it suggests broader cultural differences in terms of privatisation (a shift from community to household, from common leisure provision to personal/family ownership), and



individualisation (the trend towards living out one's project of the self independently of traditional defining structures of identity). Consequently, we suggest that the situation in any one country can be usefully understood in terms of the convergence or differentiation of national (or regional) cultures as part of such broader processes - particularly, globalization, privatisation, individualization and consumerism.

While there are many specific hypotheses to be examined according to each of the three approaches outlined above, this fourth approach looks beyond the tendency of childhood and youth research to be framed by national concerns (Chisholm, 1995; although see Drotner, 1996). This is crucial as the media (or the 'mediatization' of culture) clearly work at all levels from local to global (see Lemish et al, *this volume*). Indeed, not only does globalisation arouse public anxieties - particularly regarding national identity, linguistic boundaries or moral tradition - but also globalization re-frames age-old concerns over both 'the child' and 'youth' as children and young people are positioned as a target of these anxieties, being seen as the 'weak link' through which external 'threats' make their entry. A contrary, but also problematic, discourse of globalisation can be detected beneath the notion of the so-called Information Society, for this assumes a kind of Whig history where everyone is supposedly marching in the same, technologically determined, progressive direction.<sup>13</sup> Our project attempts to avoid both these discourses - of threat and of progress. Unless children and young people's use of new media are understood in their cultural context, the host of statistical findings which research produces about the diffusion of media across Europe, for example, provides a kind of Rorschach blot on which to project potentially inappropriate assumptions (whether of opportunity or danger) about other nations. The advantage of cross-national research is that it challenges the decontextualising, even ethnocentric assumptions easily made by research conducted in national contexts (especially in relatively large or powerful countries), as these often rest on presumptions about how other countries are similar, or opposite, to one's own. In terms of developing both theory and policy, the advantage is clearly that of facilitating an awareness of how things could be - and are elsewhere - arranged differently.

## **Overview of this Special Issue**

---

<sup>13</sup>Consider the concerns behind the most European Governments' policies to keep up or get ahead in the race to produce the 'digital generation'.

In order to incorporate diverse interests within a common research framework, the project has evolved a multi-method design of considerable - often daunting - scope.<sup>14</sup> The project translates the theoretical concerns outlined above into methodological commitments as follows. The first is to the integration of childhood and youth - hence the research design spans the age range from young children just starting or about to start school, to youth and young adults leaving school and making the transition to further education or the workplace. The second is to the social worlds of childhood and youth as real places where real meanings are generated (not as fantasy, imitation or precursors of the 'real' i.e. adult world). This requires a hermeneutic approach to which asserts no universal 'child' or 'youth' but multiple realities, summed up most simply in the notion of listening to participants' voices as they speak for themselves (Morrow and Richards, 1996). This is not just an argument for empowering the research subject: listening to children and young people is vital because only by appreciating their perspectives can we appreciate their practices and these, in turn, are central to understanding how their activities contribute to the construction of daily life. A third commitment is to the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, where for most countries, the qualitative preceded the quantitative, but where neither is subordinated to the other: some research questions are only amenable to one or other approach, for others the qualitative was used to inform the quantitative both in survey design and interpretation, and for yet others, the quantitative informed interpretation of the qualitative.

In the qualitative phase, we stressed the selection of respondents from a diversity of backgrounds together with the importance of listening to the views of children and young people themselves, without treating a parental account as superior. The insights from this phase - based variously on family interviews, depth interviews and focus groups - were used to construct a detailed questionnaire covering many aspects of the uses, meanings and experiences of media as well as questions designed to map the demographic and lifestyle patterns and contexts of media use. Based on national sampling frames and administered either at home or in school, this survey was completed by over 15,000 children and young people across the twelve countries during 1997-8. The survey used was directly comparable in all but some details across the 12 countries; the design and methods for the qualitative work

---

<sup>14</sup>All teams conducted the substantial core of the research design, with additions according to national priorities, media provision and pragmatic considerations. Only equivalent data are compared directly.

varied rather more, as is the nature of qualitative research; both are outlined in brief in Appendix I. In this volume we present some of the initial findings and ideas emerging from selected comparisons of the national studies in anticipation of systematic comparisons still to come involving each nation comparing data across all research themes.<sup>15</sup>

The papers in this volume reflect the theoretical diversity of the project as a whole, but all take heart from the knowledge that little cross-cultural work on children and young people's media use has yet been conducted, making a straightforward presentation of new data of value in itself. The authors of this volume cannot hope to integrate fully the different theoretical or disciplinary perspectives used; rather we hope that within the scope of the project there will be something to interest researchers of diverse backgrounds, furthering debate across these different perspectives in the process. Of the variety of themes included in the project, we have selected several of particular interest for inclusion in this *Special Issue*. Van der Voort et al begin to map the complex relations between domestic media access, time use, and uses and gratifications for a variety of 'old' and 'new' media in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Johnsson-Smaragdi et al develop the notion of patterns of time use in particular to construct a typology of old and new media users across three countries differing in media access and cultural practices. Pasquier et al focus on the context of the family, showing how comparative differences - themselves not always predictable - in patterns of authority and regulation within the home have consequences for media use by children and young people in France, Flanders, Italy and Sweden. Suess et al identify certain generalities in terms of developmental trajectories which hold, with some variations, across countries which differ considerably in media diffusion. And Lemish et al tackle the thorny problem of globalization, tracing the complex ways in which globalized media are appropriated by children and young people in a variety of local contexts.

As will be apparent, in order to maximise the benefits of comparative analysis, project reporting is organised around genuine collaboration to address key themes rather than a series of national reports fitting a common agenda. However, given that this is work-in-progress, there has been some arbitrariness in selecting the comparisons to be included here. Some

---

<sup>15</sup>Comparative findings across 12 countries on many aspects of children and young people's media environment, together with details of research methods and theoretical/policy implications, will be reported in an edited volume currently in preparation, Livingstone et al (eds.), *Children and their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*.

comparisons were of *a priori* interest, as when investigating the consequences for time use of different national patterns of diffusion for cable/satellite television or personal computers in Britain and the Netherlands (van der Voort et al, *this volume*). Other differences emerged precisely because the selection of countries for comparison was somewhat *ad hoc*, as with the discovery that Italian and Swedish domestic contexts for media use resembled each other in significant ways, in contrast with France and Flanders (Pasquier et al, *this volume*). The project is open, therefore, to exploring comparisons of hypothetical interest - loosely following the four approaches described above - and to discovering unexpected comparisons which in turn may provoke theory development. Having had the example of only a few comparative projects on this scale to guide us - though many warnings from well-intentioned observers! - we hope that this volume will stimulate the development of approaches to comparative analysis (itself one of *EJC*'s objectives) - and about European life worlds in general, as well stimulating discussion of our primary concern, the changing media environment for children and young people.

## References

Andreasen, M. S. (1994). Patterns of Family Life and Television Consumption From 1945 to the 1990's. In J. Bryant & A. C. Huston (Eds.), *Media, Children and The Family - Social Scientific, Psychodynamic and Clinical Perspectives* (p.19-35). UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass.

Aries, P. (1962). *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Vintage Books.

Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage.

Blumler, J. G., McLeod, J. M., & Rosengren, K. E. (1992). An introduction to comparative communication research. In J. G. Blumler, J. M. McLeod, & K. E. Rosengren (Eds.), *Comparatively speaking: communication and culture across space and time*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Boëthius, U. (1995). Controlled pleasures: youth and literary texts. In J. Fornas & G. Bolin (Eds.), *Youth Culture in Late Modernity* (p.39-57). London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Buchner, P. (1990). Growing up in the Eighties: Changes in the social biography of childhood in the FRG. In Chisholm, L., Buchner, P., Kruger, H. H., & Brown, P. (Eds.). (1990). *Childhood, Youth and Social Change: A Comparative Perspective*. London: Falmer Press.

Buchner, P., Bois-Reymond, M., & Kruger, H.-H. (1995). Growing up in three European regions. In L. Chisholm, P. Buchner, H.-H. Kruger, & M. Bois-Reymond (Eds.), *Growing up in Europe: Contemporary horizons in childhood and youth studies*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Buckingham, D. (1993). *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Chisholm, L. (1995). European youth research: Tour de Force or Turmbau zu Babel? In L. Chisholm, P. Buchner, H.-H. Kruger, & M. Bois-Reymond (Eds.), *Growing up in Europe: Contemporary horizons in childhood and youth studies*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Corsaro, W. A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Pine Forge Press.

Drotner, K. (1992). Modernity and media panics. In M. Skovmand & K. C. Schroder (Eds.), *Media cultures: reappraising transnational media*. London: Routledge.

Drotner, K. (1996). Cross-over culture and cultural identities. *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 4(1), 4-17.

Drotner, K. (1998). Difference and diversity: Trends in young Danes' media uses. *Media, Culture and Society*, in press.

Fornas, J., & Bolin, G. (Eds.). (1994). *Youth Culture in Late Modernity*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1993). *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Himmelweit, H. T., Oppenheim, A. N., & Vince, P. (1958). *Television and the Child: An Empirical Study of the Effect of Television on the Young*. London and New York: Oxford University Press.

James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing childhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kinder, M. (1991). *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press.

Lash, S., & Urry, J. (1994). *Economies of signs and space*. London: Sage.

Livingstone, S. (1996). On the continuing problems of media effects research. In J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass Media and Society*. London: Edward Arnold. Second edition.

Livingstone, S. , & Gaskell, G. (1995). Children, young people and the television screen. In F. Guglielmelli (Ed.), *Reinventing television: the world conference*. Paris: Association Television et Culture.

Livingstone, S., Gaskell, G., & Bovill, M. (1997). Europäische Fernseh-Kinder in veränderten Medienwelten. *Television*, 10(2), 4-12.

Livingstone, S., Bovill, M., and Gaskell, G. (eds.), (in prep.). *Children and their Changing Media Environment: A European Comparative Study*.

Meyrowitz, J. (1985). *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Miles, I., Bessant, J., Guy, K., & Rush, H. (1987). IT futures in households and communities. In R. Finnegan, G. Salaman, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Information technology: social issues - a reader*. UK: Hodder & Stoughton.

Morrow, V., and Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: an overview. *Children and Society*, 10, 90-105.

Neuman, W. R. (1991). *The future of the mass audience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Qvortrup, J. (1995). Childhood and modern society: A paradoxical relationship. In J. Brannen & M. O'Brien (Eds.), *Childhood and Parenthood* (pp. 189-198). London: Institute of Education University of London.

Reimer, B. (1995). Youth and modern lifestyles. In J. Fornas & G. Bolin (Eds.), *Youth culture in late modernity*. London: Sage.

Rogers, E. M. (1986). *Communication Technology: The New Media in Society*. New York: The Free Press.

Rose, N. (1990). *Governing the soul: the shaping of the private self*. London: Routledge.

Schoenbach, K., and Becker, L. B. (1989). In Becker, L. B., & Schoenbach, K. (Eds.). *Audience Responses to Media Diversification: Coping with Plenty*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Seiter, E. (1993). *Sold separately: Children and parents in consumer culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Silverstone, R. S. (1997). New media in European households. In U. T. Lange & K. Goldhammer (Eds.), *Exploring the limits: Europe's changing communication environment* (p.113-134). Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

Silverstone, R., & Hirsch, E. (Eds.). (1992). *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*. London: Routledge.

Ziehe, T. (1994). From living standard to life style. *Young: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, 2(2), 2-16.



## Appendix I: Research design for the project, as conducted in 12 countries

The twelve participating countries have completed a survey on nationally representative samples of children and young people, using the same core questions, as follows

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of interview</i>	<i>Ages</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Denmark	School	6-17	1500
Finland	School	7/9-10/12-13/15-16	1000
Belgium (Flanders)	School	6-17	1000
France	School	6-17	1500
Germany	School	6-17	1000
Israel	School	7/9-10/12-13/15-16	1100
Italy	School	13-14/16-17	1680
Netherlands	In home	6-17	1355
Spain	School	6-7/9-10/12-13/15-16	937
Sweden	School	7-16	1600
Switzerland	School	6-7/9-10/12-13/15-16	1680
The United Kingdom	In home	6-17	1303

In nine of the countries in-depth individual and group interviews have been held, based on a common interview schedule, as follows:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of interview</i>	<i>Approximate numbers of individuals</i>
Denmark	Groups in school and day clubs	100
	Individual interviews at home	50
Finland	Groups in school	200
	Individual interviews at home	50
France	Groups in school	150
	Individual interviews at home	50
Israel	Groups in school	50
	Family interviews at home	50
Italy	Groups in school	250
	Individual interviews	5
Spain	Groups in school	50
	Individual interviews	5
Sweden	Diaries in school	100
	Groups in school	100
Switzerland	Groups/individual interviews in school/computer camp	87
The United Kingdom.	Groups in school	200
	Individual interviews at home	50

