

The co-evolution of families and media (guest blog)

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This report by POLIS intern Alissa Steiner



Family and media

In this age of advancing media technology, global communication and social networking, media have become central features of family entertainment and communication. But as children become increasingly media-literate, often more so than their parents, anxieties have rightfully risen over the safety risks that media present for children and the ways in which media should be managed and regulated.

This concern over the effects that media have on children and familial relationships led Sonia Livingstone and Ranjana Das of the London School of Economics to investigate, with [a new report](#) on the ways in which media trends shape families, and vice-versa.

“[Changing Media, Changing Families,](#)” outlines several key demographic, social-structural and relational trends, focusing on the ways families are changing, media are developing, and where the two institutions are converging.

As Sonia Livingstone said, “It is time to stop asking about the impact of media on the family...instead, we ask how families and media are coevolving.”

The report addresses societal and parental concerns over the integration of media into the family structure and ultimately what policy changes can be made to better manage the risks that media present for children and to promote media literacy for parents.

According to Annie Mullins, this rising concern regarding children and the media is precisely what Vodaphone has responded to with the launch of *Digital Parenting*. The magazine includes expert advice on topics such as cyberbullying, technology in the classroom and mobiles & health, as well as how-to guides for Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Vodaphone. *Digital Parenting* and its [sister website](#), are Vodaphone’s attempt to inform parents about both the risks and opportunities presented by our digital culture and to increase their media literacy.

At the launch of the POLIS report, the panel addressed a sizeable audience of teachers, journalists, child psychologists and students as well as other media and family. Important questions and opinions regarding the changing trends of media in family life were raised: Are family relationships mediated by networking sites? Do different family structures impact how families use media? Are the problems that media pose for parents any different from the past, or does it essentially come down to the general challenges of parenting?

The major difference, according to Livingstone, is the array of content that children can easily access through the media, especially the internet. Naturally, this includes dangers such as Cyberbullies and the availability of sites featuring content such as Eating Disorder encouragement groups and illegal pornography. Because of this, parents should educate themselves on the digital world that their children are engaged in to understand these perils and how best to manage them.

As the panel noted, media use is a privilege that should be structured as much as possible by parents, and is also something that can be taken away.

However, as family structure today is changing and globalising, pre-existing ties are often strengthened and mediated by technology. Social networking sites are prevalently used by family members, including even grandparents, to keep in touch with each other over great distances. Families today also use mobile technology to plan, organise and communicate quickly, and this is particularly helpful in the case of families with two working

parents or in single-parent households.

The benefits of such technology can be great, if children receive clear, strong messages from both their parents and their schools about how to become responsible users of digital technology.

Thus, it is a joint effort between society and the family to work towards embracing the positive possibilities that media provide. Research such as “Changing Media, Changing Families” and projects like *Digital Parenting* are important examples of how research and education can help us move towards the goal of understanding both the risks and opportunities of media and how we can integrate them safely and effectively into family life.

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At the POLIS Media and Family Series event, which took place on Wednesday, 17 November at the LSE, Livingstone and Das presented the report of their European-wide study, “Changing Media, Changing Families,” and were joined on a panel by POLIS director Charlie Beckett and by Annie Mullins OBE, Global Head of Content Standards at Vodafone, who launched Vodafone’s new informational magazine, *Digital Parenting*

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