

# Children and Media - In the Age of Marketing

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## Introduction:

Historians remind us that our conception of childhood — and our research interest in children’s socialization, both arise from at least a three century long struggle over the valorization of ‘children’. Those concerned with children’s welfare carefully studied children’s lives in schools, family and community helping to consolidate this modernist tradition. Until recently, media seemed to play a rather minor part in these struggles to formulate what we mean by children’s welfare and in the policies we recommended to promote it. Yet looking more carefully behind the banner of the enlightenment, we notice that books, long sanctified as the privileged vehicle of moral development (Pilgrims Progress) became mandated as the ‘cannon’ for our modernist notions of schooling in which literacy became the requisite skill of democratic citizenship. But as books became integrated into children’s lives, they were also vilified as signs of intellectual and moral degeneration — as in the case of the chap books of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the “penny dreadfuls” of the 19<sup>th</sup> and comics of the 20<sup>th</sup> — as the alarmists rallied in reaction to children’s literary tastes and growing cultural autonomy. Historically media have served this very interesting role: they become a lightning rod for deeper public debates about cultural values and children’s vulnerability.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction of television agitated these latent concerns about our paradoxical valorization of children’s culture. It must be recalled, that in its time, television was seen as a powerful cultural technology: Most modernist states therefore embraced TV warily, mindful of the uncertain power of mass communications, yet deeply committed to making television a force for social progress. In short, media were expected to contribute to the cultural life of the nation by bringing the family together in a shared culture and collective enlightenment. Every country in the developed west — including the USA, UK, France, Holland, Germany, perceived that television would radically change the family. Since the airwaves were a public resource, governments imposed a rather broad cultural mission on the broadcasters. Only the USA has not signed the UN convention on Human Rights of the Child which includes the right to “enjoy leisure, recreation and cultural activities”.

Canada, was a typical welfare state: it believed that the health of the nation lay in mobilizing media wisely to strengthen its cultural capital. Perched at the northern edge of the American Empire, Canadian legislators were particularly sensitive to the precariousness of its broadcast system: Like other welfare states it funded a national broadcaster, the CBC, to be an exponent and guardian of those Canadian values and standards and we mandated the whole broadcast system with the “development of Canadian expression through programming that reflects Canadian

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<sup>1</sup> These same debates continue today: for example, a Surrey schoolboard recently banned a book normalizing the life of children of gay families from the library on the basis of its unsuitability for young children.

attitudes, opinions ideas, values and artistic creativity.” Concerned about future generations, children were specifically mentioned as a key mandate of the broadcast system: “Serve the needs and interests and reflect the circumstances and aspirations..be varied and comprehensive providing a balance of information enlightenment and entertainment for Canadian men and women and children of all ages, interests and taste.” And as the system developed regulatory bodies were created to adjudicate children’s advertising:

The purpose of the Code is to serve as a guide to advertisers and agencies in preparing commercial messages which adequately recognize the special characteristics of the children’s audience. Children, especially the very young, live in a world that is part imaginary, part real and sometimes do not distinguish clearly between the two. Children’s advertising should respect and not abuse the power of the child’s imagination.....Discretion and sensitivity will be exercised by the clearance committee when reviewing children’s advertising, particularly with reference to sex-role stereotyping and violence consistent with the principles of industry broadcast self regulatory codes : (a) Children’s advertising must not encourage or portray a range of values that are inconsistent with the moral, ethical or legal standards of contemporary Canadian society. (b) Children’s advertising must not imply that possession or use of a product makes the owner superior or that without it the child will be open to ridicule or contempt. This prohibition does not apply to true statements regarding educational or health benefits.

I suspect these are very like the policies formulated in Denmark.

But these broad regulatory frameworks have proved inadequate for the new cultural politics of the post war era. The panics over children’s media have only intensified over the last fifty years, amid the mounting sense of anxiety which beset the postmodern family. Sociologists like David Reisman (Reisman, 1950) were early to warn of a generational divide that would arise as affluence and mass media together transformed America from an inner-directed traditional morality to an outer-directed peer oriented consumer culture. Reisman was among the first to wonder about what this transition from a modernist to a postmodernist ethos meant for children. In America especially a constellation of unique circumstances fomented a deep sense of a crisis about this transition in post-war childrearing . Commentators remained divided. Psycho-historian Llyod deMause was enthusiastic about this laissez-faire childrearing practice arguing that “helping” rather than “socializing” (controlling, disciplining) the child was a final step in the psychic liberation of children from the nightmare that was their history (DeMause, 1974). Others watching the privileged and cosseted Spock generation grow up, claiming that laissez-faire parenting and television was tearing at the fabric of the American way of life. They blamed diminished moral discipline and the fading work ethic for the erosion of educational standards and the general malaise in family life.

So too began a long and rather divisive argument concerning the role that television played in children’s lives. Early mass media theorists complained that television made the crisis of the modern family worse — by disrupting the modernist matrix of socialization. Rather than opening children up to the wonders of the world, the living-room window offered only a vast wasteland of banal and trivial cartoons. These critics pointed out that children often spent as much time alone in front of the screen as they did in school, and more time watching commercials than they did reading books. And pollsters were to add that the media onslaught was troubling to many parents who felt that surely kids were numbing their wits, escaping into fantasy and basically just succumbing to the hypnotic call of the box

(Steiner, 1963). Lynn Spigel has traced the growing sense of uncertainty that circulated through the popular press. The early optimism about this great democratizer gave ground to a vilification of its insidious effect on the American way of life. As Spigel notes:

Though it emerged in 1950's amidst enthusiasm that would inform, educate and entertain the privileged post war baby boom: mass media have also been seen as a threatening force that circulates forbidden secrets to children, and that does so in ways that parents and even the state cannot fully control. Worse still, parents may not even know how and where their children have acquired this information. "With the mass commercial dissemination of ideas, the parent is so to speak left out of the mediation loop, and the child becomes the direct addressee of the message. Perhaps for this reason, the history of children's involvement with mass media have been marked by a deep concern on the part of adult groups to monitor their entertainment and survey their pleasures (Spigel, 1998: 114.).

Those of us who research and write about these changes tend to fall into two camps—I will call them the modernists and the postmodernists—each who speak about and on behalf of children: but do so from very different points of view. Stitching together the anxieties about schooling, coach potatoes and the mind numbing effects of TV viewing, modernist moralizers have wagged their fingers at TV, pointing to declining literacy and general academic performance in schools. Perhaps Neil Postman's (1982) lament for the dissolution of 'literate childhood' is the best example of this modernist position:

my argument is limited to saying that a major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favouring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom and by demanding a certain kind of content .. in a phrase by creating new forms of truth-telling. .. I believe the epistemology created by television not only is inferior to print based epistemology but is dangerous and absurdist (Postman, 1985: 27).

Postman claimed that TV brought the family together, but in an unexpected and unproductive way. The popularity of commercial mass media designed primarily with adult audiences in mind, had formed a cultural environment in which 'Children grew up too soon'. American children were being deprived of the innocence and the languid developmental progress appropriate to civilized society because TV was "breaking a four-hundred year old truce between gregariousness and openness fostered by orality and the introspection and isolation fostered by the printed word". He goes on: "Stated in the most dramatic terms, the accusation can be made that the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. It creates a culture without a moral foundation. It undermines certain mental processes and social relations that make human life worth living" (Postman, 1993: xiii).

TV could only have an impact to the degree that it could cultivate a youth audience. The commercial channels specialized in lively light entertainment, mostly super hero cartoons which proved very attractive to young males. TV became the key channel for marketing communication targeted at kids, which in turn financed the expansion in children's television production in a virtuous circuit of popular media culture. Daily viewing rose steadily from 1.2 hours in the 1950's to 2.5 hours by the early 1970's depending on children's age and class. This is why critics blamed

the networks for declining cultural, educational and moral standards — television had successfully established its place in children's lives. Public service broadcasters had a hard time attracting kids away from entertainment TV.

And as children's fascination with the box grew, so too did the number of soft-drink, cereal, snack food and toy merchandisers who were willing to use this media for direct to kid selling (John, 1999). Children's marketing intensified again when in 1981, the Reagan administration deregulated children's television entirely, dismantling the final sanctions on children's programming and advertising. In short the US networks abandoned any pretense to serving the public interest — to educate, enlighten and cultivate children — in favor of their own interest in the bottom line (Kline, 1993). Into this regulatory vacuum, children's merchandisers have swarmed with their eyes firmly set on children as consumers and as an audience spending billions in search of "kidfluence". Having saturated the media they have turned to new synergistic promotions that extend into the schools (Channel One's commercialized version of media literacy that is broadcast to 30,000 high schools) and the new virtual playgrounds and chat rooms that proliferate on the Internet.

Deregulation has been perceived by many modernist critics as a powerful political strike at the very heart of their belief in children's vulnerability. And so began a new struggle over children's media which has underwritten the last 20 years of television activism in the USA which has attempted to articulate the problems created by the expansion of commercial television.<sup>2</sup> Arguing that children need to be protected from commercial exploitation in the same way that 19<sup>th</sup> Century advocates protected children from abuses in factories and the family, children's advocates have once again demanded restrictions on children's broadcasters, more public service television, social marketing campaigns, and prophylactic media literacy programmes in schools to counteract the subversive impact of the idiot box.<sup>3</sup> Similar arguments have resounded around the world but not surprisingly, these criticisms are strongest in the USA, where de-regulation completely overturned the compromises that had been forged around the notions of children's vulnerability and developmental inadequacy (Kunkel, 1990). Dave Grossman author of On Killing (Grossman, 1997) has emerged as this generation's leading critic of the media industries arguing that "Most of all, the American people need to learn the lesson of Jonesboro. Violence is not a game; it's not fun; it's not something that we

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to cable, and the hesitant response from the Canadian regulators (CRTC), Canadian children gained access to endless American broadcasts produced for a global market. The positive effect of commercialization was an increased production of children's television programmes in the USA, and in Canada for the US market. Yet the links established via cable, telecommunications and satellite between Canadian households and American programmers circumvented those policy safeguards that were meant to warrant the Canadian media's performance and adjudicate broadcasters' public responsibility for Canadian culture -- particularly the regulations on Canadian content, on gratuitous violence and on the restrictions on Canadian children's advertisers and the means by which they sell through public media. Children's media have not only become more sophisticated and synergistic in their marketing, they have siphoned money from the public sector. Unable to compete for the mass audience, the CBC, chopped children's production budgets. Long underfunded, our provincial educational and schools broadcast networks floundered and in some cases were privatized because they were not able to compete with American productions on commercial terms. In short, the mission of Canadian media has been reduced to providing entertainment. Little wonder that our debates about children's culture gravitate to a politics of lifestyles.

<sup>3</sup> For example the Supreme Court of Canada (1989) has ruled in the Quebec vs. Irwin toys case that provinces have a right to protect children from "manipulation" in public media under their commercial legislation.

do for entertainment. Violence kills and maims. Every parent in America needs to be warned of the impact that TV and other forms of violent media have on their children, just as we would warn them of some widespread carcinogen. *The problem is that the TV networks, which use the public airwaves we have licensed to them, are our key means of public education in America*” (Grossman, 1999).

Many postmodernist commentators however, have responded by dismissing such claims as the exaggerated ‘alarmism’ of bourgeois rectitude (Berger, 1973: 173). Henry Jenkins has compared the recent congressional hearings to a witch hunt: “Suddenly, we are finding ourselves in a national witch hunt to determine which form of popular culture is to blame for the mass murders and video games seemed like a better candidate than most” he says. Jenkins rebuffs this growing hysteria: “We are afraid of our children. We are afraid of their reactions to digital media. And we suddenly can’t avoid either”. What these liberators of children fear more than the marketers, was the paternalistic cultural values of the state which can’t understand or respect children’s culture, and their genuine quest for varied and less conventional forms of cultural experience (Jenkins, 1999). Postmodern writers tend to deny media effects and celebrate children’s ‘agency’ –their creative and active exploration of their cultural world from their own position. They write articles urging parents to tolerate this new digital culture because it represents the values and aesthetics of children. In a recent article Davie et al. state “The problem here is partly to do with the implicit assumption about the audience that are at stake - and in particular, the notion that adults should be in a position to define what children need, irrespective of what they appear to want” (Buckingham, 1996: 8) (Davies, 2000). They scoff at the prior generations of moralizers who have sought to protect children from the evil influences of idleness, comics, or video nasties (Cumberbatch, Maguire, & Woods, 1993). Don’t pathologize every new pleasure or leisure pastime of young people, they claim (Cumberbatch, 2000). However incomprehensible to parents and critics, children’s choice of programming is at least more in keeping with children’s own values and developmental needs because it emerges from a negotiation between producers and youth audiences. Besides which, it is only entertainment. Liberators therefore advise parents to lighten up a bit, and let children’s cultural industries serve their child audiences free from the invasive interference of adult censors. These scholars propose a media studies project that is about extending children’s freedom of choice in a cultural marketplace.

In his book Being Digital Negroponte envisions a future where children will be liberated by digital communication technologies:

your right and left cuff links or earrings may communicate with each other by low orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your present PC. Mass media will be redefined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalized information and entertainment. Schools will change to become more like museums and playgrounds for children to assemble ideas and socialize with other children all over the world. The digital planet will look and feel like the head of a pin. (Negroponte, 1995)

Many of our colleagues show a similar enthusiasm for this brave new digital world in which children have become the pioneers in part because, children’s fascination with interactive media augurs the end of television’s reign of terror.

Douglas Rushkoff, for example enthuses that “kids rather than simply receiving media, are actively changing the image on the screen. Their television picture is not piped down into the home from some higher authority — it is an image that can be changed” (Rushkoff, 1996: 182). He quotes Timothy Leary to support his optimism about interactivity:

The importance of the Nintendo phenomenon is about equal to that of the Gutenberg Printing press. Here you had a new generation of kids who grew up knowing that they could change what’s on the screen. (Rushkoff, 1996: 30)

To some degree these intense conflicts over the ways we think about and valorize the future of childhood are to be expected. As Kirsten Drotner observes “Children and young people are prime objects of media panics not merely because they are often media pioneers; not merely because they challenge social and cultural power relations, nor because they symbolize ideological rifts. They are panic targets just as much because they inevitably represent experiences and emotions that are irrevocably lost to adults.” (Drotner, 1992: 59). Our debates about children and media too, seem to oscillate between our modernist belief in the state and its role in promoting and protecting vulnerable children, and post-modern acceptance of the market as an autonomous libertory zone of choice and pleasure. In the midst of an epochal transformation of political ideologies we should not be surprised that child studies too has become key site of struggle over the conceptions of childhood welfare. In the USA especially, the media panics have shaped presidential platforms because the politics of children’s media brings into play the deeper tensions of the transitional American family caught between the modernizing state and the postmodernizing market.

<p>Modern</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Schools</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">Family</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">State</p>	<p>Postmodern</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Community/ Peers</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Market</p>
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It has become fashionable in media studies circles to dismiss as outdated, the idea that media impact our culture. In what follows I wish to challenge this idea, by outlining the debates about media effects . Observing these impacts from my vantage point as a Canadian, living in the shadow of the American Empire, I have come to feel that we cannot reduce the debates about media and children to matters of taste and symoblics. I say this provocatively not because I want to suppress children’s agency or abhor the anarchic aesthetics of children’s popular culture, but because this view simply ignores the power and potential of an ever expanding commercial media sector. <sup>4</sup> I will suggest that America provides an extreme “natural experiment” demonstrating what happens when the state retreats from regulating cultural risks and off-loads the responsibilities for children’s enculturation onto parents alone. <sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The one clear exception is the restrictions on cigarette advertising which along with anti-smoking campaigns have made youth (12-18) the least cigarette-prone segment of the population.

<sup>5</sup> Although we have a nine o'clock watershed on 'gratuitous violence' we have failed extend this to cable. We have also seen the CBC stop producing children's drama (they can't compete with US networks), we have accepted the privatization and underfunding of our educational television networks, and we have refused to even think about restrictions on new children's media (cable, satellite and internet).

## Learning about and from Media

The idea of 'direct' effects of television content preoccupied early media researchers, many of whom felt that behavioural psychology's experimentalist methods could reveal the truth about media's impact on kids. Believing that programming content was cognitively processed as information they examined how children comprehended and learned from TV by conducting simple experiments: expose children to TV programmes and test them afterwards. Researchers also examined whether the onslaught of visual information might effect brain development, alter attentional mechanisms or overwhelm information processing capacities by eliciting trance-like uncritical mental states. Yet much of this research was done in schools (or university lectures) using pencil and paper tests to detect the effect of an 'informative or persuasive film'.

Generally speaking the experimental study of children's information processing found that television didn't pacify and mesmerize kids: children were active and capable learners depending on their developmental and cognitive abilities (Anderson, 1988). Children were savvy viewers too; quickly picking up the conventions (grammar) of TV and developing sophisticated ways of interpreting the stories — motives of characters, contexts of behaviour etc (Salomon, 1983). TV it seems was an effective communicator to the young especially because of its novelty, its interesting characters, and the power of visualization, which when combined afforded this medium a unique potential to make information more enjoyable for learning. If anything, the cognitive experimentalists argued, TV had enormous potential to educate and inform children a hypothesis which needed to be tested in the field.

Hilde Himmelweit (Himmelweit et. al., 1958) seized the opportunity to study the impact of television on British children. Himmelweit saw the diffusion of TV as a disruption of both developmental sequence of learning as well as patterned family life. This research examined broadly the processes of adjustment in the TV family across different ages and classes. Their in depth interviews with over 4000 families found there was no one effect of TV. Children did seem to regularize their use of TV and develop preferences and habits which stabilized but not uniformly. The results suggested that both class and educational background of the family were especially important in the processes of adoption and patterning of family television use. When TV was integrated into a family that encouraged learning it could contribute to the child's achievements at school; yet for others in different circumstances excessive TV use could detract from social and educational attainment.

Himmelweit (Himmelweit, 1977) continued to track these children as they grew up, noting how their media use interacted with those broader socio-cultural factors to determine their success at school and general social development. Moreover gender differences in media use might also play an important role in understanding the long term consequences of media within the home. Their longitudinal study carefully documented how social class and parental education moderated the impact of TV on children's learning, attitudes and personalities. Media was clearly a contributing factor to healthy development: but for children growing up in Britain during the 50's and 60's both class and available school resources were more important because families guided the way children incorporated them into their lives.

Wilbur Schramm's et. al. (Schramm, 1961) pioneering work focused on families within a number of communities who were just acquiring TV. Tracking what TV meant in the daily lives of kids, Schramm's work did a lot to complexify discussions of the media's effects on schooling and on children's welfare generally. Firstly, although there

were significant differences between TV and non TV families there were also clear differences in the children's motivation and capacity to learn from TV. This was because children assimilated TV into their established routines and dispositions. Among his most startling observations, for example Schramm found that younger children of high I.Q. watched more TV and did better at school. Conversely older children of lower IQ watched more TV and did comparatively worse at school. TV's effects were not uniform. For bright young children, TV seemed to be an educational resource; for duller older ones a mind numbing distraction. This result reflected TV's ambiguous neutrality: it was both a magical window onto the world helping educate, inform and broaden children's horizons or a vast wasteland filled with distracting entertainment which diminished reading and literacy. It all depended on who watched what.

By the late 1960's however, it had become apparent that commercialized television at home was simply not fulfilling its original promise to be an educational force in children's lives. This was largely understandable given that broadcasters profits and therefore investments in production were directed towards the mass market: Children's media were of low quality because they were underfunded. Yet researchers felt audio visual media were a powerful tool to enhance children's understanding of complex and abstract constructs, and should become a regular tool for educators in schools. Teachers they argued should also incorporate TV, and computers into the classroom, as learning technologies and for teaching media literacy skills. But there was no allocation of funds for production.<sup>6</sup> American progressives therefore agitated for a public broadcaster — the PBS to counter the vast wasteland. The outcry was of sufficient intensity that public funding was made available for the Children's Television Workshop (CTW). *Sesame Street* has since become the flagship for educational programming in the US. In Canada, we too responded to the vast wasteland debate by creating provincial educational broadcast networks.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the CTW research revealed classically ambiguous prospects concerning the use of TV to level the educational playing field for the underprivileged. The educational benefits of regular watching of *Sesame Street* seemed to depend on the quality of parental support and encouragement, which was less frequent in precisely those homes that *Sesame* targeted (Lesser, 1974). Although *Sesame Street* has been an enormously successful, and indeed lucrative experiment in educational television, it did not inspire an increasing budget for educational programming nor did it arrest the declining literacy rates among underprivileged children. Nor could similar ventures in televised education ever establish the hold on the young audience that *Sesame Street* did. In short, although television was capable of contributing to children's education, it was going to require sizeable public resources to achieve this modernist vision. In North America, governments have backed away from this challenge, preferring to require the commercial broadcasters to produce more educational children's programming.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yet provincial broadcasters were never well enough funded to fulfill expectations for schools and continuing educational production.

<sup>8</sup> Actually, the recent children's television act has done more to change the face of children's television in the United States by requiring commercial broadcasters to air three hours of educational programming in their schedule. Schmitt notes: "While there are many successes of the Three-Hour Rule, it does not appear that the full potential of this medium as a teaching tool has yet been realized" (Schmitt, 1999 #208: 27).

## Television and the Socialization of Aggressive and Anti-social Behaviour

In North America at least anecdotal evidence suggested that the television generation was becoming unfit, increasingly violent and less literate and numerate. Clearly children learned more than facts from TV: through observing social behaviors, by identifying with characters, and through depictions of a broader social world of conflict and sexuality, the stories TV seemed to have broader implications for the social, moral and interpersonal dispositions of young viewers. Over the years media violence became the most researched topic in communication studies. The full weight of social science methods were applied to the diagnosis of the growing aggressiveness of this TV generation.<sup>9</sup>

The Surgeon Generals report on media violence issued in 1972 added a scientific clang to the alarm bells that were already ringing about rising rates of violent crime of a baby boom population entering its oedipal rebellion phase (Comstock & Rubinstein, 1972). If television was a powerful tool of learning, what were kids learning from watching those high action police dramas and cartoons that seemed to be their preferred entertainment. Content analysis had revealed that North American children's media were consistently filled with programming which emphasized, and sometimes celebrated the use of force, revenge and anti-social behavior (NTVS, 1996.) Viewing surveys repeatedly found that children, but especially young males, preferred the most violent programmes inadvertently exposing themselves to thousands of symbolic slayings and fights each year. Was violence on television simply a narrative feature of light entertainment — a good story enjoyed by children but one that didn't harm them as the industry maintained? A number of experimental psychologists set out to explain how the representation of violence in media contributed to violence in society.

Psychologists explored this issue in a number of ways — by comparing rising crime statistics in America with other countries (with less violent media), by studying the correlations between TV watching and aggressive behavior, and notably in the laboratory, where an experimental approach set out to measure changes in the behavior of children exposed to violent shows or films. Since the problem seemed especially acute for the very young, many of the experiments used cartoons such as the *Road Runner* as a stimulus. By carefully viewing children's behaviour after watching, they hoped to demonstrate whether watching 'symbolic violence' increased the likelihood of aggressive attitudes and behavior, or, as other psychologists maintained, whether the imaginary participation in violent fantasy might reduce aggressiveness through a cathartic psychological release of pent up emotions and frustrations.

Armed with psychological theories researchers set out to prove definitively that watching violent shows made kids more aggressive. They conducted elaborate laboratory studies exploring the emotional, learning and desensitization mechanisms involved in children's responses to watching violent TV. Studies did tend to reveal increased aggressiveness in children and after watching for violent entertainment. A number behavioural measures of aggression were used including fighting, attitudes, self reports of feelings of hostility/ anger, physiological states of arousal, and the disruptive social interactions and play behaviours of children (for example hitting a Bobo doll) or administering punishment to a recalcitrant or hostile confederate through pressing a shock button.

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<sup>9</sup> I have chosen examples to illustrate this research based largely on North American studies and the question of media violence: but each of the three domains I refer to have been demonstrated elsewhere in Europe and Japan for example.

Moreover given the massive exposure to violence in media, Thomas and Drabman (1975) proposed a desensitization effect. Given that some children watched so much fictional violence and seemed to enjoy it, that heavy viewers became numbed to or simply didn't understand the consequences of real aggression. When put in a situation of helping or rescuing others from harm, desensitized subjects would be less likely to respond quickly, because they do not judge punitive behaviors directed at others, as abnormal or problematic. Their experiments found that indeed, children exposed to violent programmes, took longer to help other children who were threatened with violence. Noting that "the amount and severity of media violence has increased" (Drabman & Thomas, 1977: 202) over the last 15 years, Monitor and Hirsch argued that it was important to understand the emotional consequences of watching violence because watching violence might increase toleration of real violence and the ability to enjoy watching more of it. They replicated the Thomas and Drabman finding arguing that, although most research set out to see whether "children acted violently or to become more fearful after exposure" that "the acceptance of others aggressive behavior as a function of one's media violence intake is of equal if not greater social importance" (Molitor & Hirsch, 1994). The NIMH report (Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982) summarized the growing consensus among academics that recognized some effects of some violent television on some children:

Field studies revealed that children's learning from media was more complex, varied and difficult to study (Lull, 1990). Given the limitations of these experiments researchers sought to understand the longer term impacts of violent entertainment programmes on children's values, attitudes and behaviors within the context of children's daily social lives (Wurzel & Lometti, 1984). George Gerbner's cultivation analysis, for example, correlated children's exposure to violent content with their attitudes concerning their social world (Gerbner, 1979). Heavy viewers of crime and violence shows did have what he called the 'mean world syndrome': a propensity to expect crime and violence in their lives. Gerbner proposed therefore that the repetitive representation of crime and aggression in entertainment media did not so much stimulate aggression as led people to expect it. Heavy viewers of crime felt more "at risk" in their daily lives because they projected the world depicted on TV into their understanding of what goes on in their neighbourhoods. This result has been recently confirmed in Canada by Gosselin et al. (Gosselin, Guise, Guy Paquette, & Laplante., 1997). One of the most troubling consequences of the mean world syndrome was that both parents and kids came to believe that the streets were not safe — the implication being that children are safer in their rooms watching TV than out playing in the park with their friends.

Yet during the 1980's a series of longitudinal studies also began to confirm that the time they spent watching TV contributed to the socialization of an aggressive disposition (Huesmann and Ehron 1986). Comstock and Paik's meta-analysis summarizing thousands of studies corroborated this finding. Ehron summarizes the findings: "consistency supports the contention that aggression is a personality trait that characterizes the individual over time and across many situations" which requires research into the acquisition of aggression in context, particularly the gender, family dynamics, and socio-cultural situation of the child (Eron, 1996: 140). He remarks that since "aggression is a personality trait that characterizes the individual over time and across many situations" effects would be expected only among heavy users of violent TV, movies and video games - where long term effects would be strongest — young males. This is why their work focused on the stable and long term effects of repeated viewing of television and video game violence through the life course. Their cross- cultural longitudinal project, (1986) reported on 600 youths studied

over 22 years. This study found that criminal acts at age 30 correlated with both the total amount of time of television viewing watched at age 8 and a preference among boys, for violent television (Huesmann and Ehron 1986). As Huesmann et al more recently points out, “The relations are not statistically large but they are robust, replicable and large enough to generate social concern.” (Huesmann, & Podolski, 1996: 181).

The weight of evidence of a series of cross cultural studies supports the idea that habitual aggressive behavior emerges in early years, when television’s contribution to aggressive disposition is potent:

“In most countries the more aggressive children also watched more television, preferred more violent programs, identified more with aggressive characters and perceived television violence as more like real life than did the less aggressive children”. His script based learning theory attempts to bridge the gap between children watching and making sense of symbolic and dramatic acts on television and their acquisition of aggressive and antisocial dispositions and attitudes: The effect of media violence in individual differences in aggression is primarily the result of a cumulative learning process during childhood. Aggressive scripts for behaviour are acquired from observation of media violence and aggressive behaviour itself stimulates the observation of media violence. The child constantly exposed to violence is more likely to develop and maintain cognitive scripts emphasizing aggressive solutions to social problems (Huesmann, 1986). Yet the consistency of the social learning effect was impressive. “The combination of extensive exposure to violence coupled with identification with aggressive characters was a particularly potent predictor of subsequent aggression for many children”. (Huesmann et al., 1996: 185).

Huesmann et. al readily acknowledge that aggression is not due to TV alone: “the existing research suggests that childhood aggression is often a product of number of interacting factors”. “Differences in arousal level, impulsivity and irritability may be moderated or exacerbated by the child’s early learning experiences; but once habitual patterns of behavior are well learned, they become very hard to change”. As Ehron points out, the implications of these studies are complex: “if aggression is learned then it can be unlearned” (Eron, 1996). During the 1990’s, the V-chip legislation was implemented and a number of social marketing initiatives targeted public attitudes towards violence.<sup>10</sup>: Yet as he also notes “an environment full of deprivations, frustrations and provocations is one in which aggression is frequently stimulated”. Over the life course aggression is also correlated with lack of self concept, poverty, broken families which are also predictors of anti-social behavior, crime and aggression. Within highly stressed families, television can play a unique role in the formation of “the children’s self -regulating and internal standards for behaviour. A child with weak or nonexistent internalized prohibitions against aggression or one who believes it is normative to behave in this way is much more likely to use aggressive scripts” (p. 144). We therefore needed to understand the social relations of families and peer groups that supported or diminished this culture of violence .

Several researchers have noted that restrictions, monitoring, co-viewing and verbal intervention on the development of media consumption habits can play a role in the socialization of aggression (Korzenny, 1977) (Greenberg, Ku, & Li, 1992) (van der Voort, 1997) (Valkenburg, Krmar, & de Roos, 1998). The Singers have noted that for very young children, family discipline style and encouragement of imagination mediate the effects of viewing

TV violence (Singer, Singer, & Rapaczynski, 1984). The work of Abelman has noted the differential impact of inductive and sensitizing family styles on gifted vs. emotionally disturbed children's judgement of "pro-social television content (Abelman, 1991). Other studies have emphasized the importance of family attitudes, discipline and child-rearing patterns as shaping children's media use and assimilation of violent material to explain why particular children develop aggressive attitudes and behaviour (Desmond, Singer, & Singer, 1990). Recent research has confirmed that parents influence on children's viewing varies in terms of the ways they encourage, channel and restrict children's active media use (Austin, Bolls, Fujioka, & Engelbertson, 1999). An important step in this direction has been taken in a forthcoming book by Bea Van den Berg (forthcoming) which examines the impact of children's media use within the postmodern family.

## Rethinking Mediated Families in the Welfare State

In the USA, as children became more aggressive and showed symptoms of an inability to learn, Neil Postman's arguments pointed to an obvious cause: these effects were greatest in those that watched the most mindless television. Although many (including myself) would critique Postman as a modernist moralizer, a bad researcher and a hopelessly overstated theorist of media effects, the claims he makes about television viewing have been confirmed repeatedly by research. There is a robust relationship between heavy TV viewing and lower educational attainment that has been demonstrated around the world. A series of studies in the USA, across Europe, and in Sweden have all confirmed the persistent relationship between excessive TV watching and declining student achievement in reading, math and overall grades. In chart # we can see the result of one study of 24,000 USA students between the ages of 8-16.

Most media researchers acknowledge that broadcast television could both contribute to the welfare of children by promoting learning and pro-social understanding (for example Sesame Street); but also sidetrack children's developmental projects and change family patterns. Huston and Wright's longitudinal Topeka Study conducted between 1981 and 1983 followed two "cohorts" (consisting of several hundred children 3-5 and 5-7 year olds) through a two year period. They tracked each child's television use by 1-week diaries gathered every six months, as well as undertaking interviews and monitoring parental viewing too. The major purposes of this longitudinal field study were to identify patterns of "developmental continuity and change in children's early television viewing "and to discover how those patterns are "related to family environmental influences and to children's cognitive skills and social behavior". They sought to measure: 1) the diversity of content and the variations in children's patterns of media use 2) the developmental sequences underwriting children's media use as a cognitive active 3) and the family patterns of regulation and media use in socialization of young children (Huston & Wright, 1996: 38).

A similar field experiment was conducted beginning in 1990 following two cohorts of 240 slightly younger children (2 and 4 years of age) for a four year period. In addition to diaries, this study employed telephone daily use surveys, interviews with parents and children concerning media use as well as gathering measures of vocabulary, school related success, knowledge about emotions, and teacher's expectations of success. Together these studies have

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<sup>10</sup> In Canada social marketing campaigns focusing on spousal abuse and violence took their place alongside Don't Drink and Drive and Anti-Smoking Campaigns. Most notable was a \$10 million dollar Broadcaster funded campaign entitled "Violence Hurts Us All" that ironically filled screens with blood.

been influential because they elucidate how developmental and contextual factors mediate children's television use in the home. Children's programme preferences are established very early in life and continue as their thinking and understanding grows more complex. Yet particularly for younger children, a large amount of viewing is of programming often chosen by adult members of the family. When they go to school, the total amount of time that children watch decreases — but so does their interest in educational programming. Cable in the home also impacted program choice by increasing the range of cartoons available and diminishing viewing of educational productions.

These researchers also show that watching educational television can support the acquisition of reading skills in families where there is parental encouragement across social strata, but not in families that don't encourage their children to learn from TV. In short context variables associated with family and community life mediate the impact of TV on the child's reading and vocabulary at age 7. The decline in literacy is explained largely in terms of exogenous variables such as whether parents read with children or provide them with books. In families where kids were left to watch cartoons, and provided no other support, children showed the effects of TV with reduced vocabulary and reading scores. They conclude: "If television is to become a more positive force for children's development, the industry has a responsibility for supplying varied, well-designed, creative programming rather than using children's programs primarily as marketing devices for advertisers products. (Huston, Zillmann, & Bryant, 1994: 57).

Their account of home viewing revealed that children not only love cartoons, but they develop an appetite for drama with more complex plots, sports, sit-coms and crime shows so that by 10-12 years the dark and cynical *Simpson's* and the romance themed *Friends* become perennial favorites. Partly these preferences can be explained by developmental factors because children do choose programmes that are consistent with their intellectual ability: but overall environmental factors and social background play a more significant role in explaining the amount and patterns of viewing. Equally striking is the fact that sex differences in television use and program preferences begin to occur by age 4-5: when girls become interested in comedy and drama and boys turn to sci-fi cartoons and action adventure programs (Groebel, 1999a). Huston claims "these demographic variables appear to affect the child through the parent and the kind of environment the parent supplies for the child" (Huston et al., 1994: 46). They go on to note that "parents own viewing habits and preferences are a powerful source of modeling and that "those families that provide more guidance and regulation have children who watch and benefit from educational programmes." These researchers suggest the family must be understood as the "core socializing force" mediating television's effects on children.

To further examine why TV impacts on some children and not others, Tannis McBeth Williams similarly examined the broader changes taking place in communities, schools and families with the introduction of television. The researchers recognized that by 1973, there was a closing window of opportunity for studying the impact of TV on family life. But in British Columbia a fortuitous set of circumstances enabled the study team to undertake a powerful natural experiment. Due to the mountainous topography some mid-sized communities in this province had been buffered from the on-slaught of television. One of the communities, which the researchers called Notel had been without television reception at all. A similarly sized and situated town, Unitel only had the national broadcast signal (CBC) creep into their valley. Both of these communities were poised to receive new transmission towers that would bring both private Canadian network (CTV) and the three American networks into their communities which were already available in the neighbouring community called Multitel. Recognizing the passing of this historic moment a

team of researchers rushed into the three communities surveying family members and gathering other relevant data from the communities before television arrived. Two years later they returned to each of the communities for a second data gathering session, and the results of this study were published in 1986 (Williams, 1986).

Their rather comprehensive account dramatically documents the effects of media on school performance - especially reading, on aggressive behavior, and on the participation in and use of community leisure resources. There was evidence of both direct and indirect effects. Direct effects were indicated by the fact that those children who watch more violent television programmes also exhibit more aggressive behaviour on the playground. But this finding is confounded by the aging process of the children, who also got more aggressive as they got older. The increased aggressive behavior among Notel boys (but not Multitel), two years after the introduction of television when measured by observing physical and verbal aggression during free play, and corroborated by peer and teacher judgements implies that this is a causal relationship (Joy, Kimball, & Zabrack, 1986).

But Williams et al.'s project is unique because it set out to explore indirect, or 'displacement effects' in context. Such effects don't relate to what the child experiences while watching TV, so much as what they do not because they are watching — the activities the child forgoes to spend time with media. Indirect effects for example provide a ready explanation of why television slows "down the acquisition of reading skills". The trend is weak, but persists when they controlled for I.Q. Williams explains that "At least for some children, time spent with television probably displaces reading practice". In the case of reading, it is the tradeoff between using one media over another — a "substitution" based on functional similarity. But displacement is not uniform and depends on personal and environmental circumstances. They go on to note that "brighter students probably move on to reading for pleasure more quickly and families of higher SES are more likely to emphasize print as a medium for learning" (p. 71). This is why television is important in the early school years when time spent with television has greater potential to influence school achievement, especially for less intelligent or motivated children who require additional reading practice and parental encouragement for this activity.

Although Rydin (Rydin, 2000) suggests Nordic countries have preserved the public service ethos for children's television, Rosengren and Windahl reported evidence of a very similar relationship between television and school achievement in Sweden. They note that this process is due to a complex feedback system that is established between media use, home and school which "starts a vicious circle; few preschool children's programs, more preschool and school fiction — worse marks — more routine motivated TV, fewer informative programs in Grade 5, more fiction and children's programs - worse marks in Grade 6". (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989: 225) These studies were undertaken before cable and satellite technologies saturated Swedish children's television diets with lavish helpings of commercially produced children's programming and advertising. I wonder what the situation is now?

## Electronically Mediated Lifestyles

Constructive play has long been sanctioned as the work of modern childhood, and Americans particularly were proud of the sports and culture resources they provided for post war children to meet, talk, learn, create and play in. Yet television, because it absorbs time that is spent in other activities, precipitated a significant shift in how children passed their leisure time, which threatened the considerable investment in public playgrounds and community

facilities. Critics, noting the declining participation rates, have argued that the TV fosters a lifestyle which privileges private leisure within the home over community events and activities. Williams and Handford's study provided some evidence that corroborated this idea that television did impact on children's leisure which "fell significantly following its arrival in Notel". "Television" she reported "apparently has little if any impact on the number of community activities available, but it has a noticeable negative effect on participation in those activities". They go on to argue that it is not a matter of substitution but that "television affects the structure of leisure" and this "negative impact was greatest for sports, and the effect was stronger for youths than for adults." (Williams & Handford, 1986: 183).

The observation that TV disrupts children's lifestyles is perhaps America's longest standing concern about media effects: To the degree that watching replaced healthier forms of active leisure and sports participation — and pummeled children with advertisements for soft drinks and high fat snack foods — television constituted a risk to public health. The Kennedy administration during the 1960's launched school fitness programs to allay the risk of television to children's well-being. It didn't work. Although the US wins gold at the Olympics it is not surprising that 40 years after this fitness panic, sedentary lifestyles have made obesity the most costly youth health issue in America. Over thirty-two percent of the US population is categorized as obese (that is 30% more than the healthy body weight). And the number of obese children has recently increased by 60% in the last 7 years. Overweight individuals suffer from a number of health complaints and complications, including heart disease, diabetes and susceptibility to infections.

I have elsewhere suggested that a number of factors contributes to these lifestyle changes. Time pressures on families mean that many stressed parents "have little time to devote to traditional family activities" (Kline, 1993). One result of a mean world view is that urban neighborhoods now seem too intimidating to allow the 'free-ranging' street life of a previous generation of children. And with their subsidies discontinued, leisure resources can cost a considerable amount. In Canada, active leisure is now a class privilege: children of middle class homes are 13.3 times more likely to play organized community sports. Families earning \$80,000 or more have a 73% participation rate whereas those earning less than \$40,000 have a 49% participation rate in organized sporting groups. The result is that many children spend an increasing amount of their free time at home, alone with TV, videos or toys. This transition to domestic leisure is especially noted among school age American children, who as Tom van der Voort notes are more likely than Dutch children to trade off active 'play time' for 'television time' (van der Voort, 1997).

It is not surprising therefore that research indicates a fairly strong correlation between body fat and amount of TV viewing among American children. (see fig 1) Individuals who watch lots of TV, especially females, also are more likely to be grossly overweight. The mechanisms might have to do with the heavy advertising of unhealthy food products, or with the displacement of healthier and more active lifestyles by less physically demanding ones in a downward spiral of lethargy (VandenBulck, 2000)(Andersen, Crespo, Bartlett, & Pratt, 1998b)(Stafford, Wells, & Mary, 1998)(Andersen, Crespo, Bartlett, & Pratt, 1998a)(Moreno, Fleta, & Mur, 1998). But whether unhealthy individuals find it easier to veg out in front of the screen, or whether the media displace healthier leisure and play activities TV is a factor in their difficulties maintaining a healthy lifestyle. In either case the consequence is the same:

Those who successfully learn to manage their viewing cost the welfare state less in terms of health system expenditures.

Applying the medical logic, media constitute what might be called a cultural risk. Using the same methods for calculating the risk of TV use for obesity, as we do for cigarettes for cancer, indicates that the “risk factor” associated with TV is higher. If we were discussing any other kind of product — for example cigarettes — we would label them a health hazard imposing severe restrictions on children’s tobacco use and limiting advertising of tobacco products to them. But we can’t do the same with the cultural risks of media because their rights to watch it are consolidated by policies which warrant the “freedom of the press” and “freedom of the market” and the “responsibilities of parents” for the socialization of children. And here we come to the nub of the problem of mediated effects: Children’s media use, unlike their education, is considered a matter of personal choice. In Canada these provisions are guaranteed by the constitution: yet the cost of their ‘cultural impact’ must be born by the welfare state.

## New Domestic Media Environments

As Joe Kincheloe (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) states, those thinking about this paradox of children’s welfare can no longer “escape the influence of the postmodern condition with its electronic media saturation”. And as Livingstone and Gaskell recently argued it is getting increasingly urgent for all of us to understand that the postmodern family is once again being disturbed by new media - from cel phones to computer games. Digital kids have access to a wider variety of media than ever before, including CD players, radio, videos, movies phones, TV, video games, books, comics, magazines and computers — whether in Denmark, Britain or the USA (Livingstone, Holden, & Bovill, 1999)(APPC 1999). But what are the implications ?

So far at any rate we note that although many youths have gained access to interactive media, television has remained an essential part of growing up postmodern. The Himmelweit project reports that “almost all 6-17 year olds (99%) watch *television* in their leisure time, and on average spend two and a half hours almost every day in front of the screen” (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999). The growing permissiveness of European families coupled with the increasing number of families where television is constantly on encourages children to use media as a way to relieve boredom. Livingstone et al’s study suggests that “1 in 5 children wake up to find (the television) already on, 1 in 3 find it on when they come home from school, and 2 in 3 say it’s still on when they go to bed”(Livingstone & Bovill, 1999). This duration is consistent across countries and does not lessen even when other forms of media are available. In the USA, we find a similar picture. Children seem to be spending more and more time with their electronic companions (Jordan, 1999) the electronic divide is largely between poorer households who have games consoles and wealthier ones that have computers and the internet.

Yet close scrutiny of the postmodern family has uncovered one important change. The living-room TV — once the focal point of familial togetherness — has given way to what Livingstone et al. (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) call a bedroom culture where children have access and control over their own media. The proliferation of media may be a response to stressed parents who are working or to conflicts within the family over media use and preferences (van der Voort, Nikken, & van Lil, 1992) (Brody & Stoneman, 1983) (Wright, Sheldon, & Cupitt, 1994). Livingstone and Bovill (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999) go on to suggest that this migration of television in to the

bedroom makes media use increasingly difficult for parents to monitor or regulate. Whatever the reason children today do spend a lot of time in their electronic cocoons. In 1997, over 64 % of Danish children have TV in their bedrooms, and 32 % have computers, but this privilege grows with age. There is an electronic divide based on access to computers. These figures are roughly comparable to the US where by the spring of 2000 60% of teens had TV's in their bedrooms.

For those with a historical imagination, it is 'déjà vu all over again'. And in spite of the heavy dose of information age rhetoric, public uncertainty about interactive media continues to grow. Originally worried that girls were being ignored and insulted by the mass media, more and more of us realize that it is boys, because they are targeted by this system who bear the brunt of their cultural impact. While the video game industry has been called on the carpet recently for promoting violence (FTC, 2000), the use of computers in schools has also been challenged for being ineffective waste of money that channels funds from teachers and books (Cordes & Miller, 2000).

From my studies of British Columbia youth we might well take this time to remember that it is children who are pioneering the information age. About 30% of this Canadian sample are what we call gamers. Moreover, they were three times more likely to be boys. Heavy gamers spend less time reading, prefer all kinds of aggressive entertainment, and spend less time in active outdoor leisure. Moreover they are less likely to have parents who impose rules or constraints on their media use and are more likely to give up doing homework and family activities to extend their play. The heavy toll of postmodernism rests on the shoulders of our boys, many of whom admit that their media use is compulsive or beyond their control.

Although things often look worse to our south (with 17,000 murders a year), Canadians are becoming concerned about what is happening among our boys too: Violent crime among youth has increased more than for the population as a whole. Youth literacy rates have plummeted and 30% of boys (20% of girls) now fail to complete high school. The number of students with special learning needs grows exponentially, especially among males who comprise 65% of those requiring help acquiring basic reading skills, 83% with emotional behavior issues, and 76% of the children coming in to councilors for problems at home. In short, the wonders of communication technologies do not seem to diminish the crisis in youth. 1 in 10 BC teens reported carrying a weapon to school which perhaps explains why 50% reported feeling unsafe there.

Over that last ten years Canadian governments have diminished public support for schools, families and children. The number of children living below the poverty line has doubled to 15.2 % (compared to 5.2% in Denmark). Single parent families now compose about 50% of the poor, and food bank clientele are now 40% children meaning that many hard pressed parents simply can't provide the support for children.. Digital children we suspect will spend even more time at home, often in their bedrooms alone, but also increasingly at school playing games, doing homework and chatting. But what will they give up to do so? I don't blame media for this, so much as the conservative political forces which propelled Canada into a free trade relationship with the USA making the "sacred trust of culture" into just another commodity. But I do suggest that in this conservative socio-structural environment, parents ability to mitigate the effects of media on the most vulnerable children becomes critical.

## CONCLUSION

Denmark can feel especially proud of the extensive institutional resources it has provided for the protection and promotion of children's welfare - in the taxes, workplace, community, schools and daycare, justice system, and family services. Your achievements, I think are the envy of many other nations. But faced with the ambiguities of our postmodern media saturation, will you be able to maintain this Nordic Valhalla?

That children enjoy using the new media is apparent. The benefits they bring to some children as sources of knowledge and entertainment are also clear. But can we overlook the evidence that media do negatively impact on children's lives too. The last half century has provided an uncertain historical lesson in children's mediated cultures - in the growing valorization of masculine aggressiveness, the declining rates of male literacy, and in the obesity of children. As new media proliferate, and as the time children spend with various media grows, one of the greatest challenges to our children's welfare may be our ability to formulate new policies which can address the complexity of this media saturated cultural environment. What is certain is that time children spend with television, and more recently computers, coupled with the changes that are taking place in the digital family and community, will ensure that media will be prominent in our debates about postmodern childhood and the multi-plexed bedroom culture of today.

In this paper I have resisted the postmodern drift in contemporary social thought because I see media not simply as matters of taste and identity — but as part of the dynamics of this new cultural system. I reviewed the media effects literature arguing there is ample reason to believe that media can both contribute to and undermine children's well-being. I believe that to the degree that they can educate and inform, media can and should play a role in supporting children's social and intellectual growth. But there is also danger of a digital divide: we must find better ways of ensuring that these benefits are distributed to all children.

To the degree that media do impact on some children negatively — their educational attainment, aggressive attitudes and behavior, and active lifestyles — we need a comprehensive and critical research that can help adjudicate the very complex social risks associated with excessive use. The study of television effects points to the family and its role in socializing media use as the key to whether media become a positive force in children's lives. Given that these risks depends on family, there is no easy regulatory response to the expansion of commercial media.

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