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Strategies of parental regulation in the media-rich home

Sonia Livingstone *

*Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science,
Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK*

Abstract

This paper investigates practices of domestic regulation of media within the family, focusing on parental attempts to manage children's access to and use of new media. Theoretically, the paper seeks to integrate the specific literature on domestic rules and regulation of media use with the broader literature on the rules and roles in social situations, arguing that parental strategies in relation to domestic media reveal both the enactment of and the negotiations over the typically informal and implicit rules and roles in family life. These issues are explored using data from two surveys: (1) the 'Young People, New Media' project surveyed 1300 children and their parents, examining the social, relational and contextual factors that shape the ways in which families develop rules for managing the introduction of the personal computer and the multiplication of television sets, among other new media changes, in the home; (2) the 'UK Children Go Online' project surveyed 1500 children and their parents, updating the picture by examining the introduction of the Internet into the family home. On the basis of these data, it is argued that despite the 'newness' of media as they successively arrive in the home, there are considerable consistencies over time in the responses of families, it being the slow-to-change relations between parents and children that shape patterns of domestic regulation and use.
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Keywords: New media; Parental mediation; Children; Television; Personal computer; Internet; Social situations

* Tel.: +44 20 7955 7710; fax: +44 20 7955 7248.
  E-mail address: s.livingstone@lse.ac.uk.
  URL: http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whoswho/Sonia.Livingstone.htm.

1. New media in the family home

A family eats supper in front of the television, laughing at shared jokes, arguing over who holds the remote control, comfortable on the sofa together. A teenage girl argues with her parents over which video she and her friends are allowed to watch at a forthcoming sleepover party, resulting in her slamming her bedroom door and turning on some loud music. A mother and father cannot decide where to put the new computer in their already-crowded home – does it go best in the living room or their son's bedroom, and what difference will this make to family life? As each new medium successively arrives in the home (radio, television, games machines, personal computer, Internet and mobile phone), it attracts widespread public attention, sometimes excited, sometimes anxious. This is expressed in the national media, in political and community fora and, the focus of this article, in the attitudes and practices in the home among family members.

If the personal computer and its associated innovations (multimedia, digitisation, interactivity, the Internet) is the radically new mass market screen medium of the late 20th/early 21st century, 40 years ago it was television which drew all the attention. In those early days of the mass child television audience, 'Television and the Child' (Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958), and 'Television in the Lives of our Children' (Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961) established our academic understanding of the place of the then new medium in the lives of children. When these seminal research studies were conducted, some 40% of the population had a television at home. The 'Young People, New Media' project (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999), originally conceived as a 40 year update on those studies, was initiated at a time when a similar proportion of UK households had acquired a personal computer and, subsequently, the 'UK Children Go Online' project (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) was initiated at a time when a similar proportion had acquired the Internet at home.

Diffusion and adoption of each of these media has been rapid. For television, in 1955 40% of UK homes had a set, rising to 80% by 1964, and by 1988 saturation was achieved with 98% having a set, the new trend by then being multiple sets, especially among households with children (Mackay, 1995), and multichannel sets (cable, satellite and most recently, digital television). For the home computer, some 34% gained domestic access by 1998, rising rapidly to 54% by 2002 (ONS, 2004). Just a few years on, the Internet is making an even more rapid entry into the household, not even being measured by the UK Government's General Household Survey before 2000, by which time it had quickly reached 33% of homes, and rising to 48% by the second half of 2003 (ONS, 2003).

Three questions arise in seeking to understand the domestic appropriation and consequences of new media. First, how do the practices and values of family life influence the use and consequences of media within the home (Bird & Jorgenson, 2003; Facer, Sutherland, Furlong, & Furlong, 2001; Mesch, 2003)? Research addressing this question tends to follow a diffusion of innovation model (Rogers, 1995) and/or an appropriation or domestication model (Miller, 1987; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Combining these approaches, Livingstone (2002) argued that new forms of technology, including new information and communication media, spread through society and find a meaningful place within the home and family life as a function of both demographic factors (age, socioeconomic status, gender, etc.) and such other factors as family composition and dynamics, cultural expectations, lifestyle, and attitudes to new technologies.