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Book review

Youth and Media: Opportunities for Development or Lurking Dangers? Children, Adolescents, and the Media

Strasburger, Victor C., and Wilson, Barbara J., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 2002, 421 pp. plus 3 appendices, \$44.95, ISBN 0-7619-2125-7

According to a recent national study (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999), the average American child spends about 5 hours a day with a variety of media, including television (2 1/2 hours), music (1 1/2 hours), and video games (20 minutes). Furthermore, more than 73% of youth between 12 and 17 use the Internet (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2002), with those having home access typically spending 46 minutes online everyday (Woodard, 2002). Such heavy consumption of media by children has been a continuing source of concern.

These concerns take on added urgency in the face of reports that show the media in a bad light. After the 1999 Columbine shootings in Littleton, CO, there were reports that the shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were “obsessed with the violent video game Doom—in which the players try to rack up the most kills—and played it every afternoon” (*Newsweek*, 1999). Also frequent are stories about sexual predators who visit teen chat rooms to lure their unsuspecting victims. More recently, senior law enforcement officers in Los Angeles (*Los Angeles Times*, 2003) publicly appealed to television stations to “reduce their coverage of police pursuits.” What was the role of the media in these incidents? And what can we do to help children better understand the messages that they receive from the media?

These and other questions about children and media are addressed in the book *Children, Adolescents, and the Media* by Strasburger and Wilson, with chapters by Funk, Donnerstein, and McCannon. As the authors write in the preface, the purpose of this book “is to present an overview of what is known about the impact of mass media on youth in the 21st century” (p. xv). The authors’ goal is to provide a comprehensive, research-oriented treatment of how children and adolescents interact with the media. Because the book is intended to serve primarily as a textbook, I start by describing each chapter, highlighting important ideas and findings. Then I discuss important issues that either were not addressed or only briefly mentioned in the book. A discussion of the various uses of the book for its rather diverse audience forms the final portion of my analysis.

The first chapter of the book begins with a description of children’s media environment and then presents the fundamental theoretical orientation of the book—its developmental focus. From research on child development, we know that young children process information differently from older children, adolescents, and adults. After presenting research on how children are different from adults and from each other, as well as how adolescents are

different from children, research on developmental differences in processing mass media is presented. This developmental framework is referred to subsequently in the book to present the different ways in which children and adolescents interact with media. The adoption of a developmental focus is a major contribution of the book, as extant research on children and media has not consistently examined how interactions with media might change and evolve during development. Recent follow-up studies have begun to shed light on the long-term effects of early media use (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, & Podolski, 2003) and highlight the need for more research to understand the cumulative and long-term effects of persistent media use. This chapter is likely to be informative and useful to researchers in media studies, who are interested in the effects of media on children but did not receive much developmental psychology in their training. Such a developmental framework will also help developmental scientists apply both theoretical and practical considerations to the specific content areas represented in children's various experiences with media.

The next chapter deals with advertising, primarily with regard to television. A description of the historical changes in advertising to children is presented first. Then the authors discuss a variety of issues, such as the content of advertising targeted toward children, children's processing of advertising, advertising in schools, regulation of advertising targeted toward children, and the teaching of advertising literacy, a very important life skill.

Media violence, in particular television violence, is addressed in the next chapter. Research has shown that exposure to media violence can contribute to the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to aggression and violence, and a general sense of apprehension and fear. From a practical point of view, it is very important to acknowledge that these conclusions regarding the effect of media violence are based on several meta-analyses of the research on the effects of television violence (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Hearold, 1986; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). The authors point out that "the correlation between media violence and aggression (.31) is only slightly smaller than that between smoking and lung cancer (nearly 0.40)" (p. 90). They further suggest that some youth may be at risk when they have a steady diet of violence on television. From these and other recent long-term studies that have tracked children into adolescence (Anderson et al., 2001) and even adulthood (Huesmann et al., 2003), we learn that parents have to be more vigilant and must restrict young children's exposure to media violence.

Chapter 4, written by Jeanne Funk, examines the impact of electronic or video games, which enjoy great popularity among American youth. Funk uses the term electronic games to focus attention on the fact that platform-based distinctions between different kinds of games are less relevant now than they were in previous analyses of children and adolescents' experiences with different media. For instance, electronic games can now be played in the arcade, on console systems (e.g., Nintendo, Gamecube, etc.), on hand-held systems (e.g., Gameboy), on personal computers, and via the Internet. Funk presents a succinct overview beginning with the development of video games, ratings of video games, and preference for different kinds of games (e.g., cartoon, fantasy violent, or human violent games). Then she reviews research on the short- and long-term effects of playing violent electronic games. An important contribution of this chapter is her presentation of a working

model to capture how playing violent electronic games influences behavior. This is an important step towards understanding the mechanisms by which electronic games mediate and influence behavior.

In chapter 5, the authors tackle the issue of sexuality and the media. Some of the topics discussed include how sex is portrayed in the media, what children and teenagers might learn from sexuality in the media, and pornography. Issues relating to sexual content in a variety of media including, television, movies, and print are also addressed.

Chapter 6 examines drugs and the media, in particular, the advertising of cigarette and alcohol to children and the impact of such advertising. In this chapter, we also read about the disturbing practice of incorporating cigarettes and alcohol in television programming, music and music videos, and movies. The brief discussion of prescription and nonprescription drugs is timely, given the case of 21-year-old Brandon Veda, who died of a massive overdose of prescription drugs while onlookers were talking to him via a Webcam in an Internet chat room. Although the authors do not discuss drugs in online contexts, it is likely that the federal government's War on Drugs will come to be waged on the Internet in the coming years.

The next chapter examines eating and eating disorders from different angles. Food advertising in the media, food in television programming and movies, food advertised in schools, role of television viewing in obesity, as well as the role of the media with regards to body image and eating disorders are discussed.

The consumption of rock music and music videos, particularly during adolescence, is the topic of chapter 8. The research on the behavioral effects of popular music is surprisingly limited. Given that American youth on average listen to music for 1 1/2 hours everyday, this is a topic that merits further research. As Strasburger and Wilson point out, conclusions about the effects of music on teenagers must be tempered by asking questions about "Which music?" and "Which adolescents?" (p. 299).

The Internet is the focus of chapter 9, written by Edward Donnerstein. Donnerstein characterizes sexual content as the primary concern regarding children's and adolescents' use of the Internet. However, as communication uses (e.g., email, instant messages, and chat rooms) dominate teenagers' online activities, an equally important concern is the effect of teen online use on their social and psychological well-being. A related concern is about the impact on identity development as a result of participating in anonymous online environments, such as chat rooms. The positive potential of the Internet, an issue of tremendous significance, is only briefly addressed.

Given that the media is here to stay and that it is unlikely to be regulated to any significant extent in the United States, the most important question is how we can empower children and adolescents so they can become critical consumers of media. This very important topic is the focus of the last chapter, written by Bob McCannon. The "what?" "why?," and "how?" of media literacy are explicated using the model of the New Mexico Media Literacy Project and is invaluable for anyone interested in media education. In the final chapter, the authors provide 10 suggestions that either entail *improving media content*, such as improving programming quality and improving advertising or entail *protecting children and teenagers from the harmful effects of media*, such as increasing media education for youth, their parents,

and health professionals. One hopes that corporations, media producers, and government agencies will heed the former and parents and advocacy groups will heed the latter group of suggestions! At the end of the book are two very useful appendices. Appendix A provides a list of media literacy skills, which are helpful in inferring the hidden intent of the messages that we receive from the media. They are essential to becoming a critical consumer of media and for the purpose of media literacy education. Appendix B provides a list of media literacy resources (e.g., children's books and web sites) for anyone interested in advocating for media literacy.

Missing from the book was a historical discussion of children's use of electronic media (Paik, 2001; Wartella & Jennings, 2001). As Ellen Wartella has pointed out, each new medium of mass communication, such as film, radio, television, and now the Internet, has brought with it "great promise for social and educational benefits, and great concern for children's exposure to inappropriate and harmful content" (p. 31). The core concerns of the debate have been remarkably consistent, regardless of the media innovation (e.g., films, radio, etc.) under consideration. Even a brief historical discussion of concerns about children's media use would have been very useful for readers, who are not intimately familiar with this branch of the communication and mass media literature. The interested reader is referred to Paik (2001) for a historical overview of children's media use and Wartella and Jennings (2001) for an excellent discussion of the historical trends in concerns about children's consumption of media.

A related point is the distinction between media form and content, an issue that was addressed only briefly. According to the authors, "old distinctions between the television screen and the computer screen or between print and broadcast are becoming less meaningful" (p. 5). Further, this merging of technologies is being accompanied by a merging of the corporations that own them (e.g., the merger of AOL and Time Warner). As a result, they argue that there is a "powerful integration of content and delivery, meaning that programming can be created, promoted, and delivered by a single corporation" (p. 6). Furthermore, in the conclusion of the first chapter, they state, "The remainder of the book will explore how children and teens respond to different types of media content such as violence and sexual messages as well as to different media technologies such as video games and the Internet" (p. 31).

The issue of media form and media content is not alluded to again. At no place in the book do the authors discuss the different kinds of media (e.g., print, radio, television, and the computer) and the features characteristic of each type of media. Most of the book is organized in terms of content issues (e.g., advertising, media violence, sexuality, drugs, etc.) and only two chapters address the media of electronic games and the Internet. This seems to suggest that media content is of primary importance to the authors. The vast body of research on the effect of television similarly attests to the importance of content. In a recent monograph documenting a follow-up of children, whose television viewing was documented when they were 5 years old, Anderson et al. (2001) found differential effects of educational programming compared to cartoons. They conclude that Marshall McLuhan was wrong about the medium being the message and suggest "the message is the message" (p. 134).

Despite all this, it is somewhat premature to toss out discussions of medium at this time. Take the computer, considered to be today's new mass medium just as television and the radio

before it. As a medium, the computer is unique in terms of the diverse uses it affords—word processing for schoolwork, playing computer and video games, and of course connecting to the Internet. At the heart of these various uses is the feature of interactivity, which is the idea that there is a dialog or an interaction between two agents (here the user and the computer). The notion of interactivity needs to be examined with regards to media. When can a medium be considered interactive? Are computer and video games interactive? How about online chat rooms? What about the current generation of “talking” dolls and toys, such as the Tamagotchi, Furby, LeapPad Learning system, and Imagination Desk Learning system? These are very important questions as children are being exposed to these “smart” technologies at a younger and younger age.

What is the effect of using such technologies on our thought processes, emotions, and identity? How does interactivity affect children and adolescents? Does the viewing of violent television have the same effect as the more interactive experience of being an aggressive agent on a video or computer game? Interactivity is also important in the context of the Internet and the culture of the Internet is evolving right in front of us. How are children and teenagers influenced by participating in interactive environments, such as chat rooms and Multi Use Dungeons (MUDs)? The Internet also poses a threat to our privacy while at the same time affording us opportunities for anonymous interactions, in a manner that is unique and increasingly accessible to children and adolescents. How does participation in such anonymous interactive environments influence identity formation among children and teenagers? With even older media, such as television, becoming digital and interactive, the notion of interactivity and its influence on behavior merited more discussion.

Our understanding of the effects of media could benefit from going beyond the traditional “media effects” perspective and adopting alternative theoretical frameworks. Much of the research reported in the book regarding the effect of media on youth has been conducted within the context of the media effects tradition, which assumes that the direction of causation is from the media into the viewer. Such a perspective fails to consider that children and adolescents are active agents with regards to their media choices. It is equally important to examine media use within the context of the family. The family systems theory provides a good framework for examining how children’s interactions with media are influenced by the values and beliefs of their families and also for examining how children’s media use can in turn influence the dynamics of the family system (Jordon, 2000).

The intended audience of the book are senior undergraduate- and beginning graduate-level students in children and media courses offered in communication, psychology, and child development departments. The book is well written and lives up to this expectation. Details of the research studies are appropriate for this level, and students will find it an engaging book. Equally important for potential instructors, a list of exercises is provided at the end of each chapter (except the last one) and can be used for written assignments as well as for in-class active learning group exercises. Up until now, there really was a vacuum with regards to a well-written book to serve as the core reading for courses on children and the media. Strasburger and Wilson’s book satisfies this need exceptionally well. However, because the book focuses largely on television research, courses that examine newer forms of media will

need to use supplemental readings from other collections, such as the *Handbook of Children and Media* (Singer & Singer, 2001) and the special issue of *The Future of Children* on children and computer technology (Packard Foundation, 2000).

Although the book is primarily intended to be a textbook, it can readily assume other roles as well. Given the breadth of the literature reviewed (there are about 80 pages of references alone), this is a must-have for any researcher and scholar interested in the media and youth and is an excellent companion to the *Handbook of Children and Media*, also published by Sage.

Even more importantly, it can easily be read and comprehended by parents, policymakers, children's advocates, and members of the press. This is especially important, given the tremendous implications that the media has for children. The chapters on media literacy and solutions to problems caused by the media are useful both for interested parents and for policymakers and children's advocates. One only hopes that the wealth of information presented about the persuasive effects of media on youth will be put to good use to bring about positive changes in media programming and in media consumption by children.

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