

KIDS AND MEDIA  
IN AMERICA

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DONALD F. ROBERTS  
ULLA G. FOEHR

*Stanford University*

*With*

VICTORIA J. RIDEOUT  
MOLLYANNE BRODIE

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THE CHANGING MEDIA  
LANDSCAPE

Of the many technological innovations the United States has witnessed during the latter half of the twenty-first century, arguably none have been more important in the lives of children and adolescents than the emergence and evolution of the new communication technologies. In a little over 50 years, we have moved from a media environment dominated by local newspapers and radio stations to one characterized by an almost continual diet of highly vivid, on-demand, audiovisual images, many with interactive capabilities.

Readers nearing retirement age probably recall a childhood media environment consisting of magazines and newspapers, radio (drama, game shows, music, 5-minute news broadcasts), possibly a phonograph, and an occasional Saturday matinee at a neighborhood movie theater – with two or three television channels perhaps joining the mix during adolescence. In contrast, most of today’s high school students cannot recall a time when the universe of television channels was fewer than three dozen (even without cable or satellite, many homes can receive more than 20 broadcast channels), and their younger siblings have never known a world without interactive video games, personal computers, the World Wide Web, and instant messaging. Older readers probably remember when chocolate syrup dabbed on a shirt sleeve served convincingly as blood in Gene Autry westerns; youths today take for granted films and video games in which blood, gore, and severed limbs complete with spasmodic nerve endings are the norm. Some of us can still recall a time when adults were assumed to be advertisers’ only targets and companies such as 3M and General Electric sponsored *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Today’s teenagers, who spent in excess of

\$155 billion in 2000 (Teens spend . . . , 2001), have never known a time when they were not viewed as consumers, thus when substantial portions of media and media content were not tailored expressly for them (Pecora, 1998).

In this modern media environment, how much time do American children devote to each of the different media? What content do they encounter, select, or ignore? What are the social conditions under which they consume different kinds of media content? Do different subgroups of youth select different media mixes? Do media-use patterns differ within different subgroups?

The importance of such seemingly straightforward questions cannot be underestimated. Without an accurate mapping of children's and adolescents' patterns of media use, we can never fully understand the role of mass mediated messages in the lives of youth. At bottom, any statement about how media content affects what youngsters believe and how they act rests on an assumption that those youngsters are exposed to the message. But what is the basis for such an assumption? Do we really have an accurate picture of children's and adolescents' patterns of media use?

Literally hundreds of empirical studies conducted over the past half-century leave little doubt that, given exposure, media content can and does influence youngsters' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, the evidence is so ample that few mass communication scholars hesitate to list mass media as equal in importance to most other socialization agents (e.g., parents, schools, churches) in the lives of contemporary U.S. children (see, e.g., Calvert, 1999; Christenson & Roberts, 1998; Comstock, 1991; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). This same body of research also tells us that the nature and degree of media influence depends on a wide array of factors, not the least of which are the various facets of media use characterized in the questions posed above: media choices, media mix, media time, content selection, consumption conditions, subgroup characteristics.

What is surprising, given the growing concern with the role of media in children's lives and the large number of empirical studies examining children and media, is the absence of comprehensive, current information about overall media use patterns among contemporary U.S. youth. In spite of numerous studies of young people's consumption of various individual media available today, we are aware of no research that has examined use of the full array of media among a representative sample of U.S. youth, let alone how young people have accepted,

adopted, and begun to use the new media that have emerged over the past few years.

### THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Over the past several decades, young people's media environment has changed in several ways, each of which has affected the kinds of information available and/or how youth interpret that information and integrate it into their belief systems. Changes include increases in both the number and kinds of media available, in the number of choices each medium offers, in the fidelity with which symbols and images can be transmitted, and in the degree of privacy with which each medium can be experienced.

Clearly, the number of different kinds of media through which youngsters acquire information has exploded. The first large-scale examinations of children's media use in North America, conducted in the late 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a, 1972b; Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961; Steiner, 1963), needed to survey only a few media: television, radio and records, print (newspapers, magazines, books), and movies. By the 1980s, however, the media landscape looked quite different. By then it included broadcast, cable, and satellite television, the VCR, newspapers, a growing number of books and magazines aimed specifically at children and adolescents, numerous audio media (e.g., stereo systems, portable radios, tape and CD players), video games, and the personal computer (see Dorr & Kunkel, 1990). At the dawn of a new millennium, the media environment continues to change. Entire television channels now target children or adolescents. Both audio systems and video games have become miniaturized and highly portable. The personal computer now includes CD-Rom and DVD capabilities and serves as a gateway to the World Wide Web, and seemingly unlimited access to any and all human information. Technological advances have put young people in constant contact with their peers via cell phones, instant messaging, e-mail, and pagers. Cellular phones have merged with the World Wide Web, and mainstream virtual reality media loom just ahead.

Not only have new media appeared, but older media have evolved, offering more channels more vividly than ever before. In the mid-1950s, major television markets typically boasted five or six broadcast channels; today, cable and satellites make literally hundreds of channels a possibility in even the most isolated locations. At the half-century mark, a