The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Concerned adults have long debated the significance of the media in the lives of children and youth. More than a century ago, parents, as well as authorities in education, religion and public life, wrote numerous articles and gave many a sermon criticizing penny dailies, ‘dime novels’ and comic books: the popular entertainment media, or ‘kids culture’, of their day. By the time television was introduced into the living rooms and apartments around the world at mid-twentieth century, the themes of research and criticism into media’s negative effects had been well established. Similar concerns and research agendas are now emerging in relation to the internet.

These are not the only research approaches to the topic of children and media in the home. Of course. We begin this chapter with an overview of this research, however, because it has been the dominant paradigm that continues to be voiced in policy debates and in family circles around the world. We then touch upon developments in what has come to be known as new audience studies, or those that insist on the consideration of social and cultural contexts when evaluating and researching the effects of media on children, families and all other media consumers. We then reflect upon some of the findings emerging from a recent in-depth study of families in the USA that we conducted, considering implications for further research.

In the USA, concerns about the negative effects of television reached a high-water mark with the Surgeon General’s studies of the 1960s and 1970s. This was an effort that played a major role in the form and shape of the developing scholarly field of mass media research overall (Comstock and Rubenstein, 1972). Research on the ‘effects’ of the media on children continues to the
present day (for comprehensive reviews of this literature, see Liebert et al. (1982) and Freedman (2002)).

It is impossible to do justice to the impressive array of such studies in the space available here. Instead, we would like to focus on that research specifically focused on children’s media in relation to parental intentions, where we see two main approaches: (1) those studies that survey children about media (Singer and Singer, 2001; Freedman, 2002); (2) those surveys that ask parents about their practices of supervising the media consumption of their children (Dorr et al., 1989; Holz, 1998; Warren, 2003). In recent years, this literature has been deepened and enhanced by studies that contextualize children’s media consumption in the context of the home, often employing multiple methodologies or in-depth participant observation and interviews. In the USA, for example, Amy Nathanson has conducted surveys with parents and with children, and has also supervised experiments with children (Nathanson, 1998, 2001, 2002; Nathanson and Yang, 2003). She and her colleagues have advocated for ‘active mediation’ or age-appropriate discussion about television content between adults and their children as a result of this research.

Some scholars, particularly those identified with the so-called ‘new audience studies’ (a tradition where we would place our own work), have looked beyond the immediate issues of children and childrearing to explore issues of context, definition and interpretation in the discussion of the role of media in family life. Silverstone et al. (1992) were pioneers in this approach in the UK with their focus on the role of the media in the daily lives of families. In the USA, James Lull’s (1980) work on the social contexts of media was equally influential. In her overview of audience research, Bird (2003) has suggested that relations to media in the context of family need to be seen as continuous with other aspects of life. Holland (2004) noted that ideas about the way media may influence children flow from certain ways of imagining childhood that themselves change across time. Messenger Davies (2001) argued that there is much to be learned by taking the perspective of children themselves as they interact with television and other media, understanding the ways in which their pleasures and other psychological satisfactions need to be understood.

Dickenson et al. (2001) studied the context of family life and its interaction with specific practices and genres of television, revealing much about both family life and family media. With its emphasis upon imagination and creativity as expressed in writing, Belton’s (2000) studies encouraged a rethinking of the whole notion of ‘influence’. Other studies have looked at specific demographic categories, such as adolescents (NB: de Bruin, 2001; Clark, 2003), and specific genres such as ‘reality television’ (Hill, 2000, 2002; Holmes, 2004). More recently, scholars in this tradition have looked at how policymaking in children’s television and family media is rooted in ideas of democracy, civic space and democratic participation (Zanker, 2004; Van Zoonen, 2004). Still other studies have looked at particular issues in family and children’s media, including sexuality (Bragg and Buckingham, 2004; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004) and even – one of the themes in our own work reported here – religion (Neumann, 2006).

As an example of work that has been particularly influential on our own, in a series of participant observational studies of children and their caregivers, Seiter (1999) observed that views about television in the family are closely related to class differences and the particular circumstances that arise in relation to limited incomes. She found that whereas the high-income preschools she studied advocated limited to no television viewing, lower-income preschools, and the parents of more modest means whose children attended them, were often more reliant upon television as a means by which busy single- or dual-income parents and overstressed caregivers could manage the demands of household management and child care. Because television is the most denigrated of media, often-strapped caregivers relied upon television but felt guilty about it, Seiter argued.
Livingstone’s work has also explored the context beyond the household that shapes family media practices in ways that we have found particularly helpful (Livingstone, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2005). She has argued that concerns about children’s media use cannot be separated from the fact that childhood is increasingly bureaucratized and supervised. She has also noted that the blurring of boundaries between public and private that is both an outcome and a cause of our increasingly mediated lives has made it increasingly difficult for parents to mediate, just as it has also made it more difficult for nations to regulate and for scholars to research the role of media in everyday family life.

Each of these studies has problematized the notion that it is sufficient to think of and study these matters as though specific stimuli and effects can be identified irrespective of the contexts of media use (Krendl, et al., 1993; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Buckingham, 2000; Clark, 2003). In this way, recent research on media use in the family is part of a broader response to critiques of the decontextualized surveys of individual use and media behaviours of the past (cf.: Willis, 1974; Lindlof, 1995; Moores, 1993, 2000; Turner, 2002; but see also Barker (2003) for a critique and reflection). Studies that explore family media use have often been rooted in the assumption that children are not passive consumers of media but are actively engaged in their own media lives, and that interactions between children and their media, and between parents, children, and media, are significant – even potentially decisive (Seiter, 1999; Livingstone, 2002; Hoover et al., 2004a).

In research that became the basis for the book *Media, Home, and Family*, we built upon these prior studies and their methods, combining observations with interviews of 269 parents and children in 62 families. Each family was interviewed first as a group; then, on a second visit, each family member was interviewed individually. The research sample was built employing maximum variation sampling, in which families were added to the study to represent a demographic range and to address gaps in our understandings as we became aware of them (Lindlof, 1995; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). The families represented a cross-section of US families in income, racial/ethnic background, religious backgrounds and family structure (dual parent, single parent, multiple generation, blended and same-sex parents). Each family had at least one child living in the home who was younger than 17, and most families had multiple children between the ages of 9 and 17.

Our work is also grounded in a particular national setting, that of the USA and its cultural context. As has been widely observed, the USA is nearly unique among the Western industrial countries in the manifest role that religion plays in the articulation of normative values. We have found it logical and necessary, therefore, to foreground religion as a key dimension of our data gathering and analysis. Simply put, it is nearly impossible for Americans (even those who are not particularly religious themselves) to discuss values and ideals without discussing religion.

In addition, ideas such as the notion of a cultural ‘mainstream’ that emerges in a number of our cases are inflected with received ideas of religious identity and values. Consistent with our essentially ‘constructivist’ approach, however, we treat such claims as ‘data’, not necessarily as ‘evidence’. American religious and spiritual self-descriptions are commonplace, and we treat them as such in our work, choosing to understand their meanings and what our informants seek to achieve by invoking those meanings rather than attempting an inductive treatment of religion as an ‘independent variable’.

Our ideas in this regard have largely emerged from concrete experience in the field. As we undertook a major multi-year, multi-method qualitative study of meaning-making in the media age, we encountered systematic descriptions of media behaviour that seemed to be linked in important ways to senses of family identity. In the course of our inquiries, we soon realized that we were encountering three different ways in which people discussed the relationship between
media and family life. We have called these 'levels of media engagement': 'experiences in the media', 'interactions about the media' and 'accounts of the media'. (Hood et al., 2004b: 74). Experiences in the media are the relatively straightforward interactions people have with the media they consume. They can express in more or less detail their reasons for watching and listening, the kinds of things they have seen and heard, what they have learned or experienced there and what they think the outcomes have been.

We should note here that there are clear interactions between these levels, and that the boundaries between them are hard to describe. We do not argue, for example that they are inductive categories or would work as such. Rather, they emerged as largely distinct in our interviews as separate ways that our informants described their own interactions with media and their identities in relation to their media lives. They are themselves descriptions of interactions between individual histories, contexts, values, and patterns and practices of viewing, and we treat them as such in our interpretations.

Interactions about the media are those contexts and moments where media experience is brought into play in social relations within the household and beyond it. This has received a great deal of attention in qualitative and cultural studies audience research (see, for example, Katz and Liebes (1985) and Lull (1990)). In statements of interactions about the media, people express the ways that media practices and discussions about media are integrated into the interactions of daily life. Such statements demonstrate the way in which media have become part of the 'cultural currencies of exchange' through which families develop and maintain relationships, and reinforce shared values, through interactions that draw upon shared media experiences.

These two levels of engagement, which move out from the direct experience of media to ways that media experience might be used in social relations, are now thought of as commonsensical, but it should be remembered that, before the emergence of culturalist and interpretive sensibilities a few decades ago, only the first of these was thought to be really significant in understanding the relationship between children and television. That media might also be understood in a larger context of practice and interaction is a more recent innovation. In our research, we have begun to understand that a third level of engagement is also important.

We call this level 'accounts of the media'. What we saw at first was a superficial inconsistency between the way people described media in their lives and the actual behaviours that would often be revealed elsewhere in interviews. The most obvious conflicts were between what parents would describe as their family's approach to media or the rules and policies for media in the home, and the actual viewing behaviour children described or we observed. Consistent with Warren (2003), Holz (1998) and Krendl et al. (1993), we found a kind of 'social desirability' effect in these matters, with parents claiming a variety of positive involvements in child television use, something that is, therefore, clearly a normative social value in the television age. But we were interested in why parents chose to give us certain ways in which these often-inconsistent stories seemed to tell us less about actual patterns of behaviour, and more about the desire of parents to present themselves as appropriately accountable for the media behaviours and actions of their children.

Rather than seeking to resolve these inconsistencies, therefore, we soon realized that there was much to be learned by theorizing them – seeking to understand what they told us about what it means to be a responsible or accountable parent in the context of a contemporary mediated society, and how children made sense of discrepancies between parental intentions and actual practices. It is clear that what people say reflects a set of received 'public scripts' which value certain kinds of media over others, and which further reinforces normative parental approaches to media in the home.

These 'accounts', therefore, draw upon what James Carey has called the 'publicly available stock of symbols' through which
we think about social and cultural relations. ‘Thinking consists of building maps of environments’, Carey (1989: 29) notes. In the case of ‘accounts of the media’, these are maps of the ways that media should function in the home and family. But it is not enough to say only that these accounts derive from larger social discourses. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about the relationship between categories of taste and value, and categories of class and social power, we began to investigate these accounts for insights into the cultural fields in which they are produced. We have described our evolving understanding of these accounts elsewhere in this way:

With Bourdieu in mind, then, we began to look at ‘accounts of the media’ as including normative claims for oneself and one’s family, not just an informant’s notion of what the media should or should not do. This...broadened the notion of ‘accounts of the media’ from a convenient label for normative claims about media practice at the individual level to a broader, more significant theoretical category that would help us understand the society in which those accounts emerged (Clark and Alters, 2004: 44).

In general terms, the ‘accounts of the media’ we encountered focused on two areas: (1) ideas about the nature of media and the relative value of certain media over others; (2) self-descriptions of how a given family or household’s media policies or practices were more strict or more lenient than others’ policies or practices. Consistent with emerging theoretical and methodological directions in theory and research, specifically ‘constructivist’ ideas about the nature of the interactions between informants and researchers (Clark, 2004a), we have wanted to understand these accounts as normative self-descriptions through which our informants craft an ideal presentation of family identity. Asking parents to talk about media and family is, in effect, an intervention that challenges them to describe their ideal version of family life and family relationships in relation to media, thus helping to construct what Silverstone (1992) has termed the ‘moral economy of the household’.

What parents intended to teach their children through household media rules, regulations and discussions, therefore, tells us a great deal about the way that they envision the role of media in relation to family life. We observed four different ways in which families attempted to make this negotiation between parental intentions, familial media practices and children’s understandings of their family and its stance in relation to media and contemporary life.

**DISTINCTIVE FAMILIES**

Two of the families in our study, the Ahmeds and the Paytons, focused on the **distinctions** they saw between their household/family ‘cultures’ and the broader media ‘culture’. While these families differ, they share in common the idea that, through careful negotiation of the line between them and ‘the media’, they can create and maintain a distinct family identity. These families were especially interesting, for whereas many families voiced the desire to create such distinctions for their families, the children in these families were particularly adept at understanding and articulating their families’ distinctiveness in ways similar to their parents. Both the Ahmeds and the Paytons are middle class in income and education terms, though for the Paytons (as we will see) there is clearly a desire to see themselves in contrast to the values of mainstream bourgeois culture.

The Ahmeds are an American Muslim family. The father, Umar, is an immigrant from Libya; the mother, Jemila, is an Anglo-American convert who was raised as a Protestant Christian. Like most American Muslims, the Ahmeds find themselves in the midst of a culture that does not readily understand or accept them and their religion. This gives the parents a multi-layered challenge with regard to television and other media. First, they find themselves needing to act in ways consistent with general norms of media parenthood, articulating and enforcing media-behavioural and viewing norms. Second, they must work to police the boundary between their culture
and the ‘mainstream’ culture represented in media, seeking to filter out negative messages about Islam, and at the same time looking for positive messages about Islam that allow their children to have the same experience enjoyed by their non-Muslim peers: media representations that normalize them and their culture.

The Ahmeds’ rules for media use resemble those from other households with two exceptions. They are more detailed than most, and they include explicit reference to Muslim prayers and family religious instruction sessions as part of the daily routine into which media necessarily would be integrated. Like other families we’ve interviewed, though, we found that the rules were more honoured in the breach than in the observance. When asked why it is hard to follow the family’s rules, 9-year-old Sakinah replies, ‘We like TV!’ She and her brothers admit that they often watch television when they get home from school when their mother is not present, in spite of the rules. In a telling passage, Sakinah’s brother Hasan reveals that even though they may watch prohibited programmes, they have nonetheless learned the rules and understand their parents’ ‘accounts of the media’. ‘The whole family knows what they are supposed to watch; it doesn’t mean they follow it’, he notes. The rules and categories have thus been learned, but the fact that they do not result in uniform adherence in behaviour is confirmed by the fact that the Ahmeds gave up on trying to control cable television viewing and cancelled their subscription (Clark, 2004b: 86).

We contend that these rules are significant in spite of their seeming impotence. That children have come to understand parents’ ideas about what is appropriate and inappropriate can and does provide important grounding in the ‘moral economy of the household’. And, such common understandings are a measure of the extent to which media are integrated into the warp and woof of domestic life in a fundamental way. That such rules may be violated may well be less important than that they are understood and accepted as normative, which they seem to be by the Ahmed children.

Significantly, the children clearly saw the articulation of rules to be consistent with, and reinforcing of, their Muslim faith. But, this is a negotiated relationship. The Ahmeds are like other families, where television and other media constitute a set of attractions that are in tension with their normative values and beliefs. And, like other families, accounts of the media then constitute an important set of markers of distinction in their lives. Also like other families, the Ahmed parents realize that they could be more coercive and restrictive in prohibition of certain kinds of television, but are reluctant to do so. Their reluctance is not just based on their acceptance of the difficulty of doing so (a real issue for most families), it is also rooted in a sense that their role as parents is to prepare their children for a later life where they will be responsible for their own choices. Sheltering them will not prepare them for adulthood, where they must make their own choices based on internalized values.

As we have said, the challenge faced by the Ahmeds is larger, given that they are part of a subaltern community in American culture. The attractions of media mean that the Ahmeds are motivated to consume them while conscious of their own difference from the ‘mainstream’ gaze for which most media are produced. This involves certain strategies of reception that combine an active search for media material that represents Islam and their culture in a positive light (or is at least relevant) with consumption of other media in ways that ‘filter’ its texts according to their particular cultural perspectives. In one case discussed with our interviewer, the Ahmeds expressed profound ambivalence towards a high-profile example of Islamic culture in popular film: Disney’s Aladdin. On the one hand, they appreciated that a popular film would represent a culture near their own, but, on the other hand, they found the representations limited and stereotypical.

The family’s consumption of media in general takes place in the context of their experience of a ‘two worlds’ identity. On the one hand, they live in American culture and relate on a day-to-day basis with American
peer groups. On the other hand, they realize they are distinct from that mainstream, and their media strategies reflect that distinction. For example, the parents act to limit the children’s exposure to popular music, prohibiting MTV viewing as well as limiting their consumption of music. This means that the children are less informed about contemporary music than many of their peers. This took an ironic turn for the boys when they travelled to Libya to meet their extended family. There, they found that their cousins were much more knowledgeable about and involved in popular music than they were. Pleased that in Libya they were respected as representatives of American culture, the boys were at the same time troubled by the contradiction.

Not surprisingly, for the children there seems to be a constant struggle over the meaning of their identity as Arab-Anglo-Muslim Americans. On the one hand, they wish to be, as younger son Aziz puts it, ‘...a regular person...’ in American culture. On the other hand, they realize the importance of the distinctions. Oldest son Hasan reflects:

I don’t know why I like this, but I don’t think of myself as American, mostly. I think of myself as Libyan or Muslim. I know I’m American, but I guess I take for granted the running water, that we have water all the time, and the TV, and video games, and the stars and stuff (Clark, 2004b: 92).

This is a particularly focused case of distinction. They are bound to American culture, but media allow them ways of negotiating a unique identity in relation to that culture. This is important, in that neither their commonality nor their distinction is the whole story. It is the negotiation between these two that continues to define the situation. As mother Jemillah suggests, this is probably an important set of lessons for the children, as they will need to continue such negotiations as they move into adulthood. The fact that media are such an important element of these negotiations, so integrated into the making of family identity, is further significant.

The Paytons share with the Ahmeds the goal of maintaining distinction vis-à-vis media culture. They wish to live an eco-friendly, sustainable lifestyle that puts them at odds with the materialism and commercialism of the dominant culture. The mother, Corrine, defines her family’s identity in terms of eco-responsibility, which she sees has having important economic and moral benefits for her family:

...if you don’t buy a lot of this stuff, it’s cheaper! And you know what? Then you don’t need to have two jobs, and then you have more time to go do stuff and you don’t need money to purchase things to do...going as a family for a walk (Clark, 2004b: 95).

It is important to understand that, for Corrine, as with others who identify themselves as eco-oriented, these ideas are relevant to more than discrete patterns and activities of life, but that they identify an identity that she seeks to weave into a consistent ‘structure of feeling’. As with the Ahmeds, this means that the Paytons think in a certain way about the media and map themselves with reference to media consumption. Corrine is also more restrictive than the Ahmeds are, in that the Paytons do not even own a television set. This situation leads to a keenly felt sense of difference for the girls. They’ve experienced a sense of isolation from not knowing about current television, and have been subject to some good-natured ribbing at school. In spite of her strong feelings about television, Corrine appreciates the situation her daughters find themselves in. She’s considered getting a set again, so they are not ‘...totally out of the loop...’ she observes.

The two Payton daughters do watch television at their father’s house, and so have some exposure there. Thus, they are aware of what they are missing. Like the Ahmed children, they understand and appreciate their mother’s ‘account of media’. They are able to relate to her desires for their media lives, even as they continue to watch television and consume other media. ‘I don’t want to get a TV just because somebody’s bugging me about it’, says Brenna, but she confirms
that in her ideal future home, television and other media will clearly be part of the landscape (Clark, 2004b: 97).

The Ahmeds and the Paytons illustrate how complicated the relationship between media and family identity is. On the one hand, both families see themselves as distinct in important ways from mainstream culture, and see media as a potential antagonist to their values and identities. Both employ strategies (explicit rules in the case of the Ahmeds and the lack of a television set in the case of Corrine Payton) intended to ameliorate the impact of media in their families' lives. Both articulate 'accounts of media' that frame these strategies, and they articulate rationale for them. In both families, these accounts and structures run up against the reality of their children's lives, where they encounter media on a daily basis in their peer groups. Thus, the ever-present reality of a mainstream culture (articulated through the media) is hard to avoid or ignore. Children and parents in both households find themselves negotiating a fine line between distinction and participation. Their shared conversations about their household 'accounts of media' provide important markers and resources in that ongoing negotiation. Further, both Jemila Ahmed and Corrine Payton feel that stricter measures (such as full prohibition) would be counter-productive, as it is important for children to develop their own tools of discernment about the media, tools that will continue to serve them in later life.

The Hartmans are upper-middle class and live in an urban setting, both parents being employed full time. Both are college educated. They own only one television set, which along with a VCR and a computer with internet access, sit in the living room of their home. Reminiscent of Jemila Ahmed, Sharon Hartman sees limiting television exposure as an important way of addressing television's challenge to parenting. They do not subscribe to cable television, and they receive only five channels of television. There are limitations on which videos are collected and viewed, as well as on internet access. These are experienced as rules and structures by the three children, the oldest a boy of 14. Also like the Ahmeds, the Hartmans describe using religious practice (daily prayer and Bible reading) as a way of constraining media use in the home.

For the Ahmeds and Paytons, the media provided a constant stream of cultural messages against which their faith or belief needed always to be articulated. The Hartmans feel the same way; though nearer the US cultural mainstream, we might have expected more of a sense of commonality with media content on their part. While the Hartmans do agree that media contain symbols and values that are significant to the moral and religious culture of their home, they make a distinction between those media messages that are 'religious' and those that are merely 'good' or 'positive'. 'There are a lot of people of different religions that are very upright in their behaviour...' says father John with reference to television shows that might contain such positive social values, 'but they’re not religious' (Alters, 2004: 108). Like these others, the Hartmans articulate an 'account of the media' that defines themselves and their values in clear distinction to television. It does not inform religious belief, in their view, but provides a way of describing themselves and their values in contrast to mainstream culture.

Also like the Ahmeds and Paytons, the Hartman children seem to have understood well their parents' attitudes about media and television. At the same time though, the
Hartmans are enthusiastic and frequent television viewers. The children report watching television unsupervised when their parents are away, and the family spoke with pride and pleasure their ritual of watching reruns of the sitcom *Home Improvement* together each afternoon. However, such inoffensive programmes are not the only ones they view. There was a good deal of discussion between our interviewer and the Hartmans over *The Simpsons*. While mother Sharon expressed deep reservations about this programme, the children clearly had seen it regularly and discussed it with one another and their peers. It was obvious in the interview that even Sharon had viewed and enjoyed this programme from time to time.

The Roelofs are less religiously oriented than the Hartmans. In further contrast to the Hartmans, they live in a rural area and have less disposable income, as only the father, Ryan, is employed full time. Thus, their income and education levels would place them in a ‘lower middle class’ category, both in social and income terms. They are not frequent church attenders, but contend that religion is an important part of their lives, and a source of important values and beliefs. Unlike the families we met earlier, the Roelofs seemed less sanguine that their ideas about appropriate media would be or could be internalized by their children. Believing that good ‘religion-informed morals’ are important to their children, they try to seek out media that are consistent with those morals, thus taking a slightly different approach than others.

But, as with other families, it was clear that the Roelofs’ aspirations to intervention in their children’s media lives are often not realized. Their oldest son, a 10-year-old, revealed in the interview that he regularly views *King of the Hill*, a programme his mother adamantly opposes (though she also admits watching it herself ‘sometimes’). He also noted that an out-of-use television set in the basement in fact receives signals and is regularly viewed by him and his brother. Like the others we’ve interviewed, then, it was important for the Roelofs to articulate an account of the media as policies and practices of viewing, and that this was an important element of their sense of themselves as a family. There is some evidence that their children have learned and to an extent internalized some of these values and ideas. How the Roelofs differ from the Hartmans is in the tools that the media themselves provide to their practices of media parenting. For the Hartmans, media contained a variety of focused moments where symbols and values could be identified and their relationship to the family’s values could be articulated. These were seen in terms of their relationship to a normative notion of ‘religion’. For the Hartman children, these values or rules (while not necessarily followed) were accessible and easy to understand and re-articulate.

This was all more difficult for the Roelofs, for whom available discourses do not provide the kind of focused standards ideas of ‘religion’ provided for the Hartmans. Like many parents, the Roelofs wish to rely instead on the media industry’s own rating system. Conveying the Hartmans’ ‘religious’ values to their children resulted in a situation where the children could share the family ‘account of media’ (though not necessarily act accordingly). For the Roelof children, their parents’ expressed attitudes about media violence (a more serious concern for them than other kinds of content) and the reliance on the media rating system left them with a less focused idea of what the family perspective on media is. For example, the younger son, Cary, revealed a good deal of confusion about what the word ‘content’ in the industry-ratings term ‘adult content’ meant. He knew he was to avoid ‘adult content’, but he had no idea whatsoever that might be. He and his brother thought it might have something to do with the amount of blood and gore in a given programme or video game, but that was about it (Alters, 2004: 123).

For both the Hartmans and the Roelofs, their expressed media rules face important challenges in practice. The media are too important and too attractive a part of life for their children to avoid them without cost, and in both households, the parents themselves admit to an active involvement in media, too.
The media are simply inevitable in family life. The question for all four families that we have considered is how to articulate policies and rules and identities in light of this reality.

FITTING IN WITH THE MEDIA

The families we have looked at so far could be described in terms of difference and distinction vis-à-vis the media. For the first two families, distinction emerged from their own social positionality at the edge of mainstream culture. For the second two families, distinction still seemed to be an issue even from their position within the cultural mainstream. For all of them, giving 'accounts of the media' enabled them to map their place in the web of social relations while not directly or successfully guiding behaviour in terms of television or other media.

The broader cultural mainstream is a different issue for the next two families, the Price-Benoits and the Franzes. For these two families, the media sphere is seen as normative in a certain way, and their accounts of the media are more about how participation in the media is important and functional than it is about the media containing values or ideas that they wish to contest or teach against.

For the Franzes, television is less something to be contested than something to be used. A two-parent family with both parents employed full time, the Franzes are well educated and of higher income, living in a university town in the Midwestern USA. Their household consumes a lot of media, from magazines to radio and television. Like other families, they have only one television set, and express the common idea that television should be limited. However, for the Franzes, it is the amount of time that children watch more than it is the content that is of concern. Father Mark says that his children '...just know that a lot of TV...we don’t approve of that'. Their account of media focuses more on other families than on their own, drawing distinctions between themselves and families that are less selective about media and less concerned about the amount of media their children consume.

At the same time, though, the Franzes appreciate media more than the others do. Their ideas about what is appropriate for their children to do and watch have gotten through, but in their interviews the children express the same sort of conflicted ideas about media that their parents articulate. On the one hand, they understand their parents' concerns about specific programmes (though they could not always articulate them clearly), such as The Simpsons; on the other hand, they like these shows and search for positive things to say about them.

What seems to be most important to the Franzes, though, is a variation on a theme we heard earlier: that parenting in the media age involves equipping children to be their own best media consumers, that positive parenting is less about prohibition and more about teaching. But, for the Franzes, this takes on an additional element, the idea that media are something that is a 'normal' part of life. Mother Kirsten expresses this with reference to her decision to let her daughter see the film Titanic at a younger age than might have been appropriate. She saw this as a 'social issue', where for her relations with her peers, Bridget needed to have seen the film. Thus, while the Franzes see themselves as having rules about media that are more restrictive than some other families, they understand that 'normal' childhood involves media, and that adulthood will, too. Unlike families for whom: a contrast between media and themselves was the driving issue, for the Franzes the media are a sphere that is inevitably part of child and adult life, and ways must be found to accommodate to them.

For the Price-Benoits, this issue of normalcy or 'fitting in' takes on a different dimension, because they are a gay family. Mark Price and Gabriel Benoit are parents to a precocious 12-year-old Lisette. Like the Franzes, Mark and Gabriel focus on time spent with media more than content. Mark makes a distinction between himself and his conservative Evangelical sister, who prohibits 'tawdry' television. For him, television is
more a waste of time than a negative influence on values. The Price-Benoit media diet is much like that of other families. They speak very much in terms of their ‘family’ when describing their media policies and other social attitudes. Lisette gives an indirect confirmation to the normalcy of their lives when she replies to the interviewers’ question of whether the structure of her family affects her media use. ‘I have friends [from] all kinds of different families, and most of us have the same kinds of rules, so I don’t think that really has much to do with it’, she says (Hood, 2004: 141).

In fact, much of what this family says is mundane and unsurprising. Like other families of their social and educational class, Mark and Gabriel encourage Lisette to read more and use other media less. They are concerned about violence on television and try to shield Lisette from such programmes and films. Like the Franzes, they seem less concerned about specific media messages than the other families are, talking more about their own satisfactions with certain kinds of media (their ‘experiences in media’) than other parents do. Further, Lisette seems to have internalized their values about media. What is significant for them, though, is that they are a family outside the mainstream, and their accounts of media are thus interesting, focused as they are on a family identity so consistent with generally accepted parental ‘accounts of the media’. For them, being ‘normal’ in media consumption is a way of understanding themselves as centred in the US social landscape, something that is particularly significant to them.

This idea of ‘normalcy’ stands alongside the sense from earlier families that media present a context within which family identity can be defined. For some families, that context is distinct. For others, the distinctions must be articulated with reference to focused religious or social values. For others, the media sphere is seen as a ‘common culture’ through which identities must be defined (for a more complete discussion, see Hoover (2006)). The media are in some ways inevitable, as we have seen, and these families demonstrate that the challenge for parents in articulating identities is to find a way of accounting for what will be the reality – that children will consume media and know about media and interact about media with their peers.

‘COUCH POTATO’ FAMILIES

In a way, the Franzes and the Price-Benoits are examples of families whose embraced identities are consistent with a kind of normative status for media in contemporary society and culture. The last two families, the Vogels and the Carsons, are even more accepting. As we have seen, the received social attitudes that underlie our ‘accounts of the media’ reveal a deep ambivalence about the role of media in our lives. The opprobrium that is often attached to media use has often been expressed under the label ‘couch potato’, or someone who is so much a media viewer that they are best described as being in a permanent vegetative state.

The Vogels are a family of three living in a large home in the mountains. Both parents are full-time employed and the family is well educated and of higher income. They frequently watch television together, and for relaxation will also retire to the home theatre they have in their basement to watch motion pictures. They have satellite television and subscribe to independent film channels. They watch news channels almost constantly. In short, they are a media-suffused family. Their media rules also differ from those of other families. Twelve-year-old daughter Renee, for example, is free to watch anything she wants so long as she continues to earn A grades in school. Interestingly, Renee uses this freedom to watch rather esoteric films and television about social injustice and oppression.

Unlike most cases, where media was seen as by definition negative, the Vogels see media as something positive, a way of relaxing and refreshing themselves. Rather than adopting a stance of restriction and distinction, they actively seek programmes and media experiences that help Renee develop positive values.
Interestingly, for Isabel Vogel (the mother), Native American spirituality defines the value context through which she consumes media: such things as violence in media are actually positive, as they are parts of life that must be understood and transcended, rather than simply avoided. Whereas other families still exercised some limits, and (more importantly) articulated 'accounts of the media' around those limits, the Vogels avoid such limits, believing that their own use and enjoyment of media is something that Renee will benefit by learning and doing.

The Vogels are clearly familiar with the larger received discourses of the media. 'I think those sorts of rules are detrimental to a child's growth', says Elton. 'You have to learn to make decisions', adds Isabel. Summing up their beliefs in this area, Elton shares his judgment that parents who are overly concerned with the influence of television on their children '...are not parenting right' (Champ, 2004: 158).

A final family, the Carsons, resemble much more the classic 'couch potato' approach to television. Where the Vogels' family life is settled, comfortable and prosperous, the Carsons are a blended family with many challenges: mental illness, child abandonment, brushes with the law. An uncle, two nephews and an unrelated friend of the boys live together in a bungalow basement in a poorer section of the city. Television, video games, web surfing and music listening are nearly constant activities. Their 'accounts of the media' were far from the dominant, normative ones. In fact, they seemed to have little knowledge of the idea that media should be controlled and that parenting involves rules and restrictions on media use. Not surprisingly, none of the children could articulate a sense of rules.

Instead, media are used to help negotiate a complex maelstrom of social experience. Teenage Jacob, for example, talks in detail about using the Asian video series Ramna1/2 as a guide to life and relationships. In addition, the Carsons watch news, listen to music, watch popular television programmes and see the latest films. That media are normatively involved in making their lives satisfying and sensical is summed up by Jacob, who says at one point, 'video games are to forget, music is to soothe, and TV is to encourage and excite' (Champ, 2004: 166).

The Vogels and Carsons are clearly outliers in the continuum of normative models of parenting. In a way, they demonstrate how unusual it is in US society to find families that are media suffused and at the same time express 'accounts of the media' that do not problematize that suffusion. Very few families in everyday experience, and certainly very few families among our interviewees, would be comfortable not making the idea of parental intervention to control media exposure a normative ideal. The Vogels and Carsons demonstrate that it is possible to articulate such an approach to media from radically different directions, but it is significant that such exceptions require such unique conditions and identities to support them.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the seeming difference between these families, a set of themes links them at the level of media engagement that we have called 'accounts of the media'. Distinction is one such theme. For some of these families, the media provide a set of symbols by which they can chart their family in social and cultural terms. Some of them, such as the Ahmeds and the Price-Benoits, see these distinctions in a large and global way, as they inhabit social categories that are clearly understood as 'others' in the context of the larger, mainstream culture. These two families respond quite differently to the question of distinction, though, with the Ahmeds basing identity on policing the line between media culture and their culture, and the Price-Benoits seeking to see media (and to be seen) in more conventional and accepting terms, again connected to questions of identity.

Other families take a more pragmatic approach to distinction. In a way, the Hartmans and the Paytons have chosen to construct the media as an 'other' against which
they create a discursive distinction. For them it is most important to inscribe distinctions and differences — to create them, in a way — within a media culture that is on other levels very much representative of their culture. This bears marks of the kind of rational and reflexive meaning-making described by Giddens (1991) and other theorists of late modernity, who suggest that the self and identity are central projects of modernity.

A second theme that runs through these cases is the issue of the inevitability of media, and the necessity of families engagement with it. In each of these families, but particularly those for whom the media were the most troubling, even the most intentional approaches at control of media use fell against the rocks of child (and parent) practices of media consumption. In some families, it was further felt that this inevitability had the status of a social fact: that participation in social life (particularly on the part of children) necessarily involved participation in media. Kirsten Franz expresses this the most explicitly, but it is a theme that runs across a range of these families, including the ‘distinct’ Paytons. Even the Ahmeds recognize that cultural currency involves media currency. This is consistent with the findings of some studies in the ‘parental mediation’ field, where parents were seen to treat television more or less as a given, but something that also could be addressed by parental ‘co-viewing’ (Bybee et al., 1982; Valkenburgh et al., 1999; Warren et al., 2002) or ‘active mediation’ (Nathanson, 1998).

A third theme that comes into relief here is the difficulty of establishing a normative definition of ‘good media’. As has been observed elsewhere (Clark, 2003; Hendershot, 2004; Hoover, 2006), the most consensual definition of good or quality media, even among audiences that are motivated by strict and moralistic attitudes (who have the most explicit and complex definitions of what is not good), is simply media that are ‘inoffensive’. For most of these families, when they describe programmes that they approve of, or watch together, they are more likely to be things like Home Improvement than culturally edgier material. The distinction between accounts of the media and the realities of practice then comes into play, in that those programmes about which meaningful conversations dealing with taste and value take place are programmes that are more ‘offensive’, such as (as we have noted) The Simpsons.

As we have inferred, the distance between normative beliefs about media (accounts of the media) and actual practice might have been understood simply as a failure of values, or a failure of parenting or even as moral weakness. Instead, what we see here explains why it is that these families must negotiate between their received and expressed accounts of media and their practices of viewing and consumption. There are a range of reasons why it makes sense for these parents and children to consume media the way they do.

What links these cases, then, is a parental strategy that accepts the fact of media in family life: the idea expressed by most of our families that parenting should involve pedagogy rather than prohibition; that good parenting should involve training children to become active media consumers. Children’s exposure to a range of media, even offensive media, thus can be an important aspect of child development. Or so the logic goes.

It goes without saying that parenting and childhood in the media age are complex. What is more important here, though, is the extent to which media culture and media practice are integrated into daily life in the household, and into parenting, child development and social relations within and outside the household. As we have argued, accounts of media have evolved to make sense of what seem to be the contradictions between media culture and idealized household cultures. These strategies are more or less successful and satisfying, but they tell us a great deal about the larger reality. They also help to address ongoing concerns in the field of children and media about the role and function of household and parental mediation. Rather than the potential efficacy of parental intervention between media and children (cf.: Kubey, 1998; Nathanson, 2002; Warren, 2003), we argue that the whole
context of the household's interaction with media needs to be understood and interpreted. This context includes, significantly, the ways that parents choose to describe their and their children's media lives. Rather than evidence of parental efficacy, such accounts tell us much more about the extent to which the media form the symbolic and values context of contemporary culture.

Thus, our research found that, despite the widespread stated desire of parents to oversee their children's media use in the home, the ways in which parental mediation strategies are worked out are far from consistent. Instead, we argue that parental mediation is part of a larger set of familial identity goals, and it is these goals - to create distinction from mainstream culture, to accept some but not all of a culture's norms, to seek media behaviour that mimics and places one within a perceived cultural norm or to challenge the very normative way in which most parents think of restricting media use - that actually influence how that mediation plays out in individual families. Ultimately, what parents want to teach their children about how to relate to the world beyond the family greatly influences the way they advocate media use within it. Whether a family wants to see themselves as mainstream or distinctive or as normal or extraordinary, the patterns of the ways in which media are discussed and experienced in family life shape the ways that children come to understand the family of which they are a part.

In methodological terms, the whole question of how parents and families wish to present themselves as media households has implications for research that depends on such accounts and treats them as 'evidence'. We recognize that less and less research on children and television today is so naïve. Nonetheless, it is common for lay and journalistic discourse about children and television to be based on opinion survey and anecdotal self-reports. To the extent that we base our assumptions about what goes on in the parent–child–media relationship on such input, we need clearly to contextualize and complexify those assumptions. The media are simply too important and integral an element of family life to take at face value the way people wish to describe their media lives.

NOTES

1 This section is excerpted from and is a review of Lynn Schofield Clark, 'Being distinctive in a mediated environment: the Ahmeds and the Paytons', in Hoover et al. (2004: 79–102). The Ahmed family was interviewed and analysed by Lynn Schofield Clark, and the Payton family was interviewed and analysed by Joseph Champ.

2 This section is excerpted from and is a review of Diane Alters, 'At the heart of the culture: the Hartmans and the Roelofs', in Hoover et al. (2004a: 103–130). The Hartmans were interviewed and analysed by Diane Alters, and the Roelofs were interviewed and analysed by Lee Hood.

3 Home Improvement was a situation comedy airing from 1991 to 1999 in the USA, featuring comedian Tim Allen as a father who hosts a television programme about home improvements, yet whose own home projects often went awry, much to the consternation of his wife and three sons.

4 King of the Hill was an animated situation comedy that aired on the Fox network from 1997 through 2006 and beyond. Created by Beavis and Butthead's Mike Judge, father Hank Hill is often besieged by problems and seeks solace, sometimes successfully, in his home life with his wife, his socially awkward son and his live-in niece, as well as with his equally besieged male neighbourhood friends.

5 This section is excerpted from and is a review of Lee Hood, 'Fitting in with the media: the Price–Benoits and the Franzes', in Hoover et al. (2004: 131–144). The Price–Benoits were interviewed and analysed by Lee Hood, and the Franzes were interviewed and analysed by Joseph Champ.

6 The Simpsons is the longest-running animated programme of all time, with 17 seasons and 372 episodes since its debut on the Fox network in 1989. Its satirical humour lampoons life in 'middle America' and features underachieving Bart, precocious Lisa, baby Maggie, and parents Homer and Marge. The programme has been a lightning rod for the US culture wars, as it is the highest-rated cartoon of all time and has received numerous accolades, yet is also named as a television programme parents least want their children to watch.

7 This section is excerpted from and a review of Joseph G. Champ, °Couch potatodom° reconsidered: the Vogels and the Carsons', in Hoover et al. (2004: 145–170). The Vogels were interviewed and analysed by Joseph Champ, and the Carsons were interviewed and analysed by Henrik Boes.
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INTRODUCTION


Although there had been declarations on the rights of the child by the League of Nations already in 1924 and by the United Nations in 1959, it was felt by some UN member states that these rights should be brought under the authority of binding international law. The convention has been ratified by all UN member states with the exceptions of the USA and Somalia.

The parties to the convention have accepted the obligation to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the convention. The almost unanimous ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the international community does represent a major advance in the promotion and protection of standards to guide society’s treatment of those under the age of 18.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPHERE

Through the adoption of this convention the legal obligations of international human rights law were extended to include children. In a strictly formal manner one could argue that this inclusion was unnecessary. The essential characteristic of human rights is their inclusive nature. Nobody is excluded, and this would seem to suggest that children are among the subjects of human rights provisions. However logical this may seem to be, in daily realities (around the world) distinctions are made between adults and children. Political systems around the globe treat adults and children in different ways. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that ‘Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly
or through freely chosen representatives’. Even democratic societies do not extend this basic citizen’s right to those under the age 18.

One can easily find robust arguments to rationally defend this differentiation between adults and children. Such arguments usually refer to ‘what is good for children’. They often go back to the Greek philosopher Plato, who was strongly against the thought that children should engage in philosophical reflection. In Book VII of *The Republic* Plato proposes a differentiation between the adult world and the world of children. Engaging children in philosophy would, in his opinion, be both destructive for children and for philosophy. Since he believes children are incapable of philosophical thought, their engagement in it would lead to indifference and the future Republic would be crowded with people who cannot discuss and who are not interested in discussion. By the way, in Plato’s thinking there also was no place in philosophy for women and slaves.

The exclusion of children from philosophical practice was intended for their ‘good’. In reality, however, it was those defending this position who actually wanted the best for themselves and their future polity. This reflects the very common desire that children should develop in accordance with the expectations that adults have. Adults want to shape the children’s world according to their desire to control and manipulate the world. In this line of thought children should not ask too many questions and should accept things as they are. In most parts of the world this has become the prevailing educational model!

Fortunately, there are those who disagree. For Lipman (1988: 14), for example, children’s philosophy is the basis of a democratic society:

If children are not given the opportunity to weigh and discuss both ends and means, and their interrelationships, they are likely to become cynical about everything except their own well-being, and adults will not be slow to condemn them as ‘mindless little relativists’.

If one agrees with John Dewey (1888), that democracy is more than the rule of the many and represents primarily a way of living together whereby all voices matter, then the capacity for autonomous thinking and for asking questions is basic to a democratic society. Since philosophy is primarily the asking of questions, children should be encouraged to engage with philosophy since they can often ask questions on topics that are all too evident for adults. The convention opens up new avenues here, as it wants to facilitate children’s participation in public communication. The convention’s legal provisions combined with the new possibilities of advanced information and communication technologies suggest an immense creative potential for the future of democratic societies. Children can help adults to understand that intelligence is more that the ability to provide answers to questions and solutions to problems. This limited understanding is almost daily demonstrated in television’s endless presentation of ‘quiz’ programmes. Even science and technology are today often presented in the format of testing how much people know. Children’s programmes could further the understanding that much more important than knowing answers to questions is asking the right questions.

The convention makes the adult–child distinction problematic, since it provides children with a series of entitlements that are essential to democratic citizenship, such as the right to free speech and the right to freedom of association.

The convention allows children to establish their own political association (with its own beliefs and ideas), but the association would be excluded from the formal political arena. Children’s entitlements to fundamental rights pose new challenges to thinking about the public sphere. In the literature on public sphere one finds the conception of public sphere as a single space where society’s public discourse is located. Against this position, others, like Nancy Fraser, argue that, since most societies are characterized by deep inequalities, a single public sphere will always be controlled by the privileged
groups in society. They propose to think in terms of a plurality of competing publics. In this conception, subordinated groups organize their own subaltern counter-publics (Fraser, 1993, 14). If public sphere is seen as single entity, then children are certainly among the less-privileged participants. And indeed, children play no role of significance in the public sphere of most (if not all) societies.

Does this provide an argument for the multiplicity of public spheres so that children can organize their own public sphere as a location where they can express opinions, share experiences and develop protest actions? Would this, however, not lead towards the creation of separatist enclaves to whose interests overall society would be conveniently immune?

It would seem that children need to have their subaltern public sphere but should also be able to interact with other sub-publics and eventually contribute to the overall direction of society.

A further complication is that in case children’s rights would be conceived of as citizen’s rights, many children would be excluded. If human rights are conceived of as citizen’s rights, then the common implication is that human rights standards are valid for national citizens only. However, in most countries there are large numbers of people who, for different reasons, cannot claim citizenship, such as asylum seekers or illegal aliens. Among those non-citizens are children who, because of this status, are denied the fundamental entitlements that the children’s rights convention promises to them.

The recognition of children’s rights gives extra urgency to the legal debate about the validity of human rights standards beyond the public sphere. Human rights are still primarily seen as legal mechanisms that protect and empower people in the public sphere. They provide a defence against acts of governments against individuals. It remains a bone of legal contention whether human rights provisions can equally be reinforced when they are violated by private parties in people’s private spheres. Yet, when one thinks about provisions to protect children’s physical and mental integrity, it would seem that such protection is particularly needed in the private sphere of family life. Exactly where children should confidently expect security and warmth they often experience harm done to them by parents or other guardians.

**GOOD VERSUS RIGHT**

The awarding of fundamental rights means that a list of entitlements to forms of decent and humane treatment is provided. The complication is that the list contains rights that may in certain circumstances conflict with each other or that collide with other pressing interests, such as parental care and responsibility in the case of children’s rights. International treaties do not provide keys for the solution of such conflicts and dilemmas. As a result – in actual daily practice – solutions will be sought in a casuistic way and often they have to be provided by courts of law. Since such solutions would ideally reflect the interests of all stakeholders involved, the casuistic approach needs a discursive method through which those affected try to find a consensual judgement on a given situation. This discursive approach is only meaningful once the rights as enlisted in the children’s convention are put into the frame of a broader normative theory. To this end, it deserves exploring whether such a theory may be found in the political philosophy of John Rawls. Whatever the shortcomings of the Rawlsian argument may be, it certainly provides a crucial argument for the prioritizing of rights over conceptions of the common good. The essence of his argument is that ‘Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override’ (Rawls, 1973: 3). And he concludes that ‘justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others’ (Rawls, 1973: 4). There is a tendency among politicians to be guided by their visions of what constitutes the common good; and equally, many parents and other guardians tend to have compelling ideas about what is good for children. This prioritizing of
good over right finds a fertile philosophical ground in post-modernist forms of normative relativism and in consequentialist approaches to ethical issues in which the ultimate ‘good’ goal sanctions the means deployed. In all fairness it cannot be ignored that there may be very sensible conceptions of the good in society, like the protection of children against pornographic or violent imagery. However, a Rawlsian normative theory would propose that right always has priority over good. This is particularly important with regard to children because of the understandable inclination of their guardians to propose that what they perceive as good for children’s welfare takes precedence over children’s rights. Often this really means that the parent’s conception of the good for children equals the welfare of the parents.

The welfare of parents and other guardians might indeed seem better served by children who do not say things they do not want to hear, who do not want access to information deemed inappropriate for them, who would not have to be listened to and whose privacy does not constitute a serious concern. However, to be able to see one’s own welfare as parent or guardian as secondary to children’s rights, is the essential challenge of the effort to move children’s communication rights beyond mere intentions.

COMMUNICATION RIGHTS

The Convention on the Rights of the Child offers several essential provisions that relate to information and communication (see Appendix I). Communication rights are important in the convention, because provisions related to information and communication were, from the beginning of the UN, seen as important. Already in 1946 the General Assembly stated that freedom of expression should be seen as the touchstone of all human rights.

More recently, the realization emerged that, in the lives of children, information and communication are ever more central with the availability of new communication media, such as the internet and the possibility of weblogs, email, chatting and the creation of individual homepages.

The relevant articles are reproduced here in the child-friendly version that was produced by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), Canada:

Article 12: You have the right to give your opinion and for adults to listen and take it seriously.

Article 13: You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.

Article 14: You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs. Your parents should help you decide what is right and wrong, and what is best for you.

Article 16: You have the right to privacy.

Article 17: You have the right to get information that is important to your well-being, from radio, newspaper, books, computers and other sources; Adults should make sure that the information you are getting is not harmful, and help you find and understand the information you need.

Article 28: You have the right to a good quality education. You should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level you can.

Article 30: You have the right to practice your own culture, language and religion – or any you choose. Minority and indigenous groups need special protection of this right.

Article 42: You have the right to know your rights! Adults should know about these rights and help you learn about them, too.

All these provisions mean that some important children’s communication rights are today codified as legal standards for the international community. The international community has made a binding commitment to respect these rights. On the 10th anniversary of the convention in 1999, the Norwegian government and UNICEF organized a meeting at which children, young people, media professionals and child
rights experts discussed the development of children’s rights in relation to media. From this meeting emerged the Oslo Challenge. The text of the Oslo Challenges is a call to action for governments, media professionals, media owners, children and parents to contribute to the realization of the rights as laid down in the convention. Thus, the intentions are clear and solid – at least on paper. As is the case with all other human rights, it needs to be questioned how the international community can move beyond laudable intentions towards equally laudable practices.

MOVING BEYOND INTENTIONS: THE OBSTACLES

General obstacles

The lack of enforcement

The weakest component of the international human rights regime is the lack of a solid and effective mechanism for the implementation of its provisions. People should be able to seek effective remedy when their human rights are violated. Unfortunately, such remedy does not exist today on the global level. The European region has a fairly effective system of human rights adjudication through its Court of Human Rights. The existing global arrangements, however, such as the UN Human Rights Commission and the committees that monitor the various human rights treaties do not constitute an independent world tribunal where complaints can be treated with supra-national jurisdiction. The UN World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) declared that ‘the promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community’. In reality, however, the majority of UN member states have little interest in interference with their human rights record. In current world politics, states still maintain a large measure of sovereignty in the treatment of their citizens. This implies, among other things, that the committee that examines the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not have the authority to receive individual complaints. This lack of detailed jurisdictional scrutiny on the international level implies most likely that provisions on children’s rights will not be subject to such examination on the national level either.

Many countries have various enforcement arrangements that address legal situations in which children want to complain about maltreatment by their parents or when they are accused of criminal conduct. Such mechanisms (such as children’s help telephone lines or children’s law centres) do not presently exist on the international level.

Most critical in terms of enforcement is the extension of the protection of rights to include horizontal relations. Fundamental rights are often violated between private actors, such as children and parents, or children and private school boards. The communication rights of children are most often violated within the family. The enforcement within the private sphere is both most difficult and most needed. In order to achieve this extension of the application of fundamental rights, jurisdictional changes, but also a great deal of education for both parents and children, would be required.

Next to these procedural issues there are also complex conceptual issues that may put obstacles in the way of implementing the convention’s legal standards.

Children as subjects of rights pose an especially difficult issue. There is already a good deal of divergent opinion about the interpretation and application of human rights standards for adults; the disagreements are even stronger when it comes to children. This is largely due to the different cultural settings within which human rights are to be implemented. There is a continuing international controversy about a Western, liberal bias in the prevailing conception of human rights and the need to recognize non-Western interpretations of rights. The widely diverging cultural conceptions of parental responsibility, for example, make worldwide consensus very difficult, if not impossible. Parental responsibility is across the world conceived in rather permissive versus more restrictive ways. A related problem
arises because of different interpretations of Article 3 of the convention, which provides that ‘the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’. The definitions of what the best interests of children are will vary greatly across cultural borders. An extra complication concerns the age of children. In different parts of the world, people have different conceptions about ages at which children come of age.

The core concept in the human rights regime is ‘human autonomy’. Ideally, we conceive of rights holders as autonomous individuals. What does this mean in the case of children? Children are initially dependent upon parents or other guardians, but as they grow up they become, to greater or lesser degrees, independent beings. In the process of their growth, individual autonomy begins to emerge. Yet, as with adult human beings, there remains throughout life a level of dependence upon others. And the intriguing complexity of the recognition of human rights is to find the balance between dependence and autonomy. With regard to children’s rights, this implies that parents and other guardians have the responsibility to facilitate the process of children becoming autonomous subjects. This often seems a thankless task. The facilitators need to make themselves redundant while not distancing themselves totally from the children. Facilitating requires presence but with limited options to express one’s views, since the views of the children take precedence. It requires a fundamental change from a more common commanding mode of communicating to a more difficult listening mode. There is (like in the case of mentally incapacitated people) the inevitable tension between the right to autonomous decision-making and the capacity to take autonomous decisions. Too often, however, the claim to autonomy is easily overridden by the dependency argument. It needs to be realized, though, that the priority of autonomy over dependence-induced heteronomy is a fundamental normative standard in international human rights instruments. It follows that in case dependence is prioritized over autonomy a basic human entitlement is violated. The defence of this violation will need very strong, substantial arguments.

The rights that the international community grants children stem from the body of international law and specifically from the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, identifying children’s rights with the law may in several countries raise enormous obstacles, since children in impoverished environments tend to see the law more as a tool of oppression than as an instrument of protection. African kids may experience, for example, that the support they provide for their families by hawking and begging makes them, for purposes of law enforcement, criminals who perform illegal acts. For many children around the world the law represents what you cannot do, not what you are entitled to do, or even less what others (including law enforcement officials) are not allowed to do to you. The implementation of children’s rights should, therefore, go beyond the application of legal rules. Children need to see their rights as their own constructions, as conditions of daily life that they identified themselves as necessary for a better life. A good illustration of this approach are the 12 rights that were proposed in 1994 by young street workers in Dakar and that meanwhile have become the common framework for action planning by working children in Africa.²

Most children in the world do not know they have fundamental rights. The child-friendly version of the convention that UNICEF Canada produced is not yet accessible to all the world’s children, and children’s rights are not yet common in school programmes around the world.

At the time the international human rights regime emerged, the prime concern was to provide protection of the rights of individuals against states. There was little attention for individual duties, as the common notion was that states did not need to be protected against individuals through the imposition of civic responsibilities. Over the past decades it became increasingly clear that human rights are not only violated by states but also by
individual parties and that individual rights need to be protected against the conduct of other individuals. This made it imperative to recognize the duties of individuals vis-à-vis the rights of other individuals. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the moral basis for such duties, particularly in its Articles 29 and 30. Article 29.1 states ‘Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible’ and Article 30 imposes upon everyone the duty to refrain from ‘any activity or act aimed at the destruction of the rights and freedoms’ set forth in the declaration. Since individuals have both rights and duties under international law, the question of children’s responsibilities in relation to their communication rights has to be addressed. Now that children are subjects of international law, they are entitled to the protection of fundamental rights; but they also have the obligation to respect and protect the rights and freedoms of others (Table 30.1).

What does this mean for communication rights?

One more general obstacle to the transformation of intentions into practices is the limited understanding about human rights violations. There is abundant evidence that the most universal feature of human rights is their universal violation. Incessantly, fundamental human entitlements are violently ignored by states, by corporations, and by individuals alike. In order to make any progress at all in the protection and implementation of human rights, the forces, interests and motives behind their violation need to be better understood. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the reasons that underlie the violations of children’s communication rights. Can they be found in culture- or class-bound conceptions of parental care and responsibility? Can a factor be the convenience of children’s exploitation for commercial, military or sexual purposes? Does the underestimation of the intellectual and emotional capabilities of children provide an explanation? Do artificial distinctions between childhood and adulthood play a role?

**Specific obstacles**

**Regarding the freedom of speech**

The free speech provision in Article 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child implies the right to say things that others (for example parents) do not want to hear. This is always problematic in situations of unequal power relations. Why would the more powerful allow this? Can it be expected that parents and other guardians possess the moral maturity to deal with this challenge to their authority?

Article 13 also provides for children’s access to information. This usually raises the key issue of the protection of children against harmful content. However, adults and children will often have different assessments of what constitutes harm, and the question is who can legitimately be the final arbiter. Is it a legitimate part of parental responsibility to interfere with children’s right of access?

The focus of much debate on the protection of minors against the abuse of free speech to disseminate pornography may distract public attention away from instances of censorship that limit children’s access to information. An illustration was the action of the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression

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<th>Table 30.1 Children and communication</th>
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<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
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<td>To be heard and to be taken seriously</td>
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<td>To free speech</td>
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<td>To cultural identity</td>
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<td>To be proud of their heritage and beliefs</td>
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against schools that imposed restrictions on children’s access to the Harry Potter books. Obstacles against the use of these books included asking for parental permission or removing of the books from the open shelves in school libraries. The concerned censors will usually claim that their action is in the best interest of the children. However, one needs to realize that, throughout the ages, those who limited access to information always had (in their perception) benevolent reasons. Whatever the rationale may be, censorship always constitutes a human rights violation. Only in situations of imminent danger to the existence of the state does international law make an exception to this norm.

Article 13 also implies children’s right of access to the media and, thus, suggests that here should be more children’s voices in the media. If one puts this within the context of the essential human rights standard of human equality, it means that children around the world should have equal opportunity to access communication media. From this perspective the current global digital divide (between and within countries) has serious implications for children. The bridging of the divide is especially urgent in view of the future participation in knowledge societies by young people.

The Oslo Challenge (referred to above) proposes that children should learn as much as they can about the media ‘so that they can make informed choices as media consumers and gain maximum benefit from the diversity the media offer’. The Oslo meeting also challenges children ‘to grasp opportunities to participate in production of media output’. There are at present around the world a growing number of good practices that demonstrate how children can contribute to media production. Illustrative examples come from a wide range of projects, from the Young Reporters of Albania who are responsible for selecting stories and planning TV production, to ‘Our Own Voice’ in Haiti that empowers child journalists, to street-level youth media in Chicago that educates inner-city youth in media arts, to the Free News project in Bangladesh that trains young journalists and provides a model of opportunities for child participation in the media, or to the French Journalist for a Day event that provides young people with a chance to participate in a real in-house newspaper enterprise.

The realization of children’s participation in media production often confronts such obstacles as the child-unfriendly work culture in many media institutions, the absence of appropriate facilities, and inadequate safety measures.

In addition to the present provisions on freedom of speech, the question can be raised about the extension of the freedom of expression and access to information provisions towards a children’s right to communicate. This new right suggests that the right to express views is meaningful only if those views are taken seriously. It questions how useful it is to speak freely if no one listens. This inevitably evokes the question of why children should be heard and why anyone would listen to children. The best answer refers to the use of children’s experiential knowledge! They should speak on issues that affect their daily lives. On these issues they are the best advocates and their views can play an important role in finding solutions.

**Regarding privacy**

For children, all four dimensions of privacy are of eminent importance. These dimensions are the protection of the child’s physical privacy; the protection of territorial privacy, i.e. one’s own space; the protection of the confidentiality of private communications; and the protection of informational privacy, i.e. the control over person-related data.

With regard to the protection of privacy, the issue of the horizontal effect of fundamental rights is especially urgent. This is because not only do parents often neglect their children’s privacy right, but also because private, corporate interests increasingly invade the children’s online world.

Marketing to children has become a billion dollar industry. Studies at the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, New York University, estimate that US$13 billion is
annually spent on marketing to American children alone.\textsuperscript{4} Several studies\textsuperscript{5} also show that the amounts to which children influence their parents' purchases have been increasing rapidly in recent years. With the use of the internet by children, online marketing has taken on growing significance. Online marketers enter children's private domains through surveillance of their conduct on virtual playgrounds and by building the kind of trusted relations with them that facilitate the commercial manipulation of their desires and preferences. One problem is that free speech provisions create important legal barriers to protecting children's rights to privacy on the internet. Advertisers can claim that their approaches to the kids market are protected under freedom of information rules. Moreover, there is, today, no consistent international legal framework on content regulation.

\textbf{Regarding the production of children's materials}

Article 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is important because there tends to be more concern for the protection of children against harmful materials than with the more constructive project of creating specially suited materials for children. The Children's Television Charter that was approved at the Prix Jeunesse Round Table at Munich, May 1995, states that 'Children's programmes should be wide-ranging in genre and content, but should not include gratuitous scenes of violence and sex'. It may be somewhat unfortunate that the production of children's materials in the media becomes law at a time when in many countries public service broadcasting is under threat. However, it cannot be excluded that commercial companies would be interested in such production, but this will inevitably only be the case when there is an interested and potentially profitable market. This cannot be guaranteed, and the pertinent article thus provides for a clear public responsibility. One of its implications is that adequate finances need to be allocated from public funds. The Children's Television Charter proposes on this issue that "Sufficient funds must be made available to make these programmes to the highest possible standards.'

Article 17 would also seem to refer to the issue of media portrayal of children in the media. This raises the important question of how children's integrity can be protected in media reporting. The ethical guidelines for reporting on children, proposed by UNICEF,\textsuperscript{6} provide several principles to assist journalists to cover children in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner.

\textbf{Regarding the right for children to enjoy their own culture and to use their own language}

Globalization processes and the concomitant cross-border movements of people (migration, labour, economic prospects, refugees, tourism) imply that more and more children grow up in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and diaspora environments. This urgently requires the capacity for intercultural dialogue. This is a difficult form of communicating that needs to be learned. This learning should be part of the formal educational process.

It is important to observe that the dialogue only works if the participants refrain from verbal and non-verbal violence in the process. The implementation of Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, therefore, requires training in non-violent communication. Even small children can be very violent in their communicative behaviour. They can be biased, judgmental, rejecting, and just plain nasty. All of this obstructs the dialogue. The international community should address this through the generous support for a global project in which children are educated to be partners in dialogical communication.

\textbf{ACTIVE PARTNERS}

Most of the thinking about children’s rights in general and their communication rights in particular comes from adults. Even child-friendly
versions of relevant texts are often produced by adults. There is an enormous risk in all these well-intended efforts that adults shape the children’s world to serve adult interests. The crucial challenge that the Convention on the Rights of the Child poses to adults is to listen to children, to consult them, work with them and to make them active partners in shaping humanity’s common communication future.

NOTES

1 For more analysis, see Hamelink (2004).

2 The African Movement of Working Children and Youth in 2004 is made up of 57 associations in 57 towns of 18 African countries; its 400 grassroots groups comprise 20,000 female housemaids, sellers in markets, independent working children and youths in streets and markets. The children organize themselves in their places of residence and work. The 12 children’s rights as formulated by African working children are:

- the right to be taught a trade
- the right to stay in the village (not to emigrate)
- the right to work in a safe environment
- the right to light and limited work
- the right to rest when sick
- the right to be listened to
- the right to healthcare
- the right to learn to read and write
- the right to play
- the right to self-expression and to form organizations
- the right to equitable legal aid, in case of difficulty.

3 More illustrations can be found on the following websites: http://www.listenup.org – a youth media network that connects young video producers; http://pbskids.org/dontbuyt – a media literacy site for young people; http://www.kqed.org/topics/education/medialiteracy/youthmedia – a site that wants to add youth voices to mainstream media.

The Adobe Youth Voices initiative empowers youth worldwide to use multimedia and digital tools to communicate and share ideas; see youthvoices@adobe.com for more information.

The World Radio Forum aims to develop children’s and youth radio. Among its goals is that children have the right to participate in radio production. The forum works with children and youth to publish and promote the Radio Manifesto: http://www.worldradioforum.org.

The Radio Manifesto (the result of 3 years of discussions with children and launched at the 4th World Summit on Media & Children, Rio de Janeiro, 2004) can be found at: http://worldradioforum.org/icyrmanifesto.shtml.


5 Among others, by Patty Valkenburg of the University of Amsterdam. See also, Kim Campbell and Kent Davis-Packard, ‘How ads get kids to say I want it’, in the Christian Science Monitor, 18 September 2000.


APPENDIX I

The relevant articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are as follows.

Article 12

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all manners affecting the child…

Article 13

1 The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.

2 The exercise of this right may be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary:

(a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; or
(b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.

Article 14

1 States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
2 States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.

3 Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Article 16

1 No child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his or her honour and reputation.

2 The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 17

States Parties recognize the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

(a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;
(b) Encourage international co-operation in the production, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;
(c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children’s books;
(d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority group or who is indigenous;
(e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of articles 13 and 18.

Article 28

1 States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

2 Promote and encourage international co-operation in matters relating to education, in particular with a view to contributing to the elimination of ignorance and illiteracy throughout the world and facilitating access to scientific and technical knowledge and modern teaching methods. In this regard, particular account shall be taken of the needs

Article 30

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.

Article 42

States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike.

APPENDIX II: ADDITIONAL SOURCES


Article 12: The UK children’s rights organization (run by under 18-year-olds) that promotes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and that has petitioned the US government to sign the convention.


REFERENCES


FURTHER READING

