

8. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This report attempts to provide a detailed picture of the recreational, non-school-related media behavior of young people in the U.S. It is based on a nationally representative sample of 2,032 young people, ranging in age from 8- to 18-years-old, who completed lengthy questionnaires focusing on the prior day's media use. In addition, a self-selected sample of 694 of these youths also completed a seven-day diary detailing their media use. The survey questionnaires and the diaries document:

- which media young people have in their homes
- which media young people use
- the duration of their media use
- where and with whom they use media
- which media genres and activities are preferred
- what young people's home media environment is like
- what rules, if any, govern their media behavior
- what relationships, if any, exist between both overall media use and exposure to individual media and various demographic variables
- what relationships, if any, exist between both overall media use and exposure to individual media and young people's media environment, school grades, contentedness, and other non-media activities.

Young people's media environment

In the U.S., young people have access to an unprecedented array of media in their homes and in their bedrooms, as well as by means of a variety of highly portable media devices. A typical 8- to 18-year-old lives in a home containing three TV sets, three CD/tape players, three radios, three VCR/DVD players, two video game consoles, and a computer. The TV is likely to receive cable or satellite signals, and there is a better than 50% chance that it receives premium channels. The computer probably has Internet access, and there is a better than 30% chance that it is high-speed access. In addition, substantial numbers of kids have most of these media in their own bedrooms. More than

two-thirds (68%) have their own TV and more than half have their own VCR/DVD player (54%); 95% have a personal music source (i.e., a radio, tape, or CD player in the bedroom, and/or a portable device such as an MP3 player); almost half say they have their own video game console and almost one-third report their own personal computer (31%).

In addition to easy physical access to most media, large numbers of these kids also report a social environment that is conducive to media use. Fewer than half (46%) of 8- to 18-year-olds report that their family has any rules governing TV use, and among older youths (7th- to 12th-graders) the proportions with rules governing TV, computers, video games, or music are even lower. In addition, more than half of our sample (51%) reports that in their home a TV plays "most of the time, even when no one is watching," and 63% say that the TV is "usually" on during meals. The result is that one out of every four 8- to 18-year-olds comes from what we call high TV orientation homes — homes in which *no rules* govern TV viewing *and* the TV is on "most of the time" *and* "usually" plays during meals.

Amount of media exposure and use

Today's young people live media-saturated lives. They spend nearly 6½ hours per day (6:21) using media, during which time they are exposed to more than 8½ hours per day (8:33) of media messages, a result of the fact that a quarter of the time (26%) that kids use media, they use two or more media simultaneously (e.g., reading while watching TV; a phenomenon we call media multitasking). Exposure to TV and music substantially outpaces exposure to other media. When time spent with TV, videos and DVDs, and movies is combined, screen exposure is over four hours daily (4:15). Music listening, that is, exposure to radio, tapes, CDs, and MP3s, garners about 1¾ hours daily (1:44) of kids' time. Young people also report in excess of an hour daily (1:02) using a computer other than for school or work, 49 minutes daily playing video games, and 43 minutes daily of recreational reading (books,

magazines, newspapers). These numbers can be compared with the 2:17 kids say they spend with their parents, the 1:00 they spend on hobbies or clubs, or among 7th- to 12th-graders, the 2:16 they spend with friends (often, we suspect, while using media), the 1:25 devoted to physical activities (sports, exercise), and the 50 minutes doing homework (again, activities that they sometimes combine with media use). When the proportion of time each young person spends with each medium is calculated, the typical U.S. 8- to 18-year-old spends 45% of all leisure media time with screen media (35% with TV and 13% with videos, DVDs, and movies), 22% of media time with audio media (radio, tapes, CDs, and MP3s), 11% with print media (newspapers, magazines, and books), 11% with computers, and 9% with video games.

Media exposure and demographic characteristics

Exposure to individual media varies in relation to several demographic characteristics. Age is the most consistent predictor of media exposure. For example, as children grow older their exposure to screen media and the time they spend playing video games decreases, while their exposure to audio media and to computers increases. Race is also a strong predictor of exposure to screen media; African American kids spend the most time with TV, videos/DVDs, and movies, followed by Hispanic kids, followed in turn by White kids. Girls spend more time than boys with audio media and less time than boys playing video games. Socioeconomic indicators such as level of parent education or income are related to surprisingly few kinds of media exposure.

Kids whose parents completed some college report less exposure to screen media than either kids whose parents completed no more than high school or kids whose parents finished college, and kids whose parents completed no more than high school spend less time reading than kids whose parents completed some or all of college.

Although race is not related to the amount of time kids spend listening to music (i.e., to audio media), it is strongly related to the kinds of music kids prefer. African American youths are significantly more likely than White kids to listen to Rap/Hip Hop, Rhythm & Blues/Soul, Reggae, and Gospel/Christian. White kids, on the other hand, spread their music preferences across Rap/Hip Hop, a number of rock subgenres (Alternative Rock, Classic Rock, Hard Rock/Heavy Metal, Rave/Techno, Ska/Punk, and Soft Rock), Top 40, and Country/Western. Hispanic youth

are the most ecumenical, listening to Latin/Salsa, Rap/Hip Hop, Reggae, Rhythm & Blues/Soul, Alternative Rock, Hard Rock/Metal, Ska/Punk, and Top 40. Girls are more likely than boys to listen to Top 40 and to Country/Western, but somewhat surprisingly, gender locates no other differences in music taste. Gender is, however, strongly related to the kinds of computer activities in which kids are most likely to engage. On any given day, girls are more likely than boys to use e-mail (31% vs. 20%), and although the likelihood of engaging in other computer activities does not differ, girls spend more time than boys visiting Web sites, sending e-mail, and instant messaging, while boys spend more time than girls playing computer games.

The media environment and media exposure

Both the physical and social media environments are strongly related to levels of media exposure. Young people with access to their own personal media, either in their bedrooms or in portable forms, report substantially higher levels of exposure than kids who do not have personal media. Kids with a TV in their bedroom watch TV almost 1½ hours more daily than kids without a TV (3:31 vs. 2:04); kids with a video game console in their bedroom spend 32 minutes more each day playing console video games;

kids who have their own computer almost double the computer time of kids who do not have their own (1:30 vs. 0:47). Moreover, kids who have each of these media in the bedroom also use other media more. For example, compared to kids who do not have their own computer, those who do have their own

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computer watch more TV and videos/movies, play more video games, and listen to more music. Similar relationships hold for personal TV and video game consoles in the bedroom. Thus, personal possession of any of these media predicts in excess of more than two hours per day of overall media exposure. Only print exposure breaks the pattern. Kids with a TV in the bedroom and those with their own computer read significantly less than kids without those media; kids with their own video game console also read less, but the difference is not statistically reliable.

Media norms within a household, particularly those that apply to TV, are also related to levels of media exposure. In homes where there is some attempt to control amount of viewing, content viewed, or both, kids watch less TV, play video games less, listen to less music, and spend less time on the computer. They

also read more. The overall result is that kids from homes where there is some attempt to control TV viewing report 1:50 less overall media exposure than kids from homes where no TV rules are imposed. Much the same pattern of relationships emerges for kids from homes that attempt to control either video game playing or computer use, but none of the relationships reach conventional levels of statistical reliability.

Congruent with the findings for TV rules, several other indicators of household TV orientation are also strongly related to media exposure. Total media exposure is 2:20 higher in homes where the TV is usually on, even when no one is watching, than in homes where it is not. Indeed, a constantly operating TV predicts significantly higher use of each of the individual media with the exception of print, where it predicts significantly less reading. A similar pattern emerges when kids from homes in which the TV is usually on during meals are compared to those from homes where the TV does not play during meals. Kids from homes where the TV is on during meals spend 1½ hours more daily with all media than do their “no-TV-during-meals” counterparts, and the differences for each individual medium replicate those found for constant TV, although the differences are not always statistically significant.

Finally, when kids from the most “TV-oriented” households are identified by grouping just those who say that in their home: (1) there are no rules governing TV, *and* (2) the TV is usually on, even when no one is watching, *and* (3) the TV usually plays during meals, the relationship between TV orientation and media exposure is most clear. Compared to kids who do not come from high TV orientation homes, those who do come from households highly oriented to TV report almost 2½ hours more daily media exposure (2:25). They watch over one hour more TV each day (1:12), play video games 25 minutes more, listen to almost a half hour more music (0:29), spend 16 minutes more on a computer, and read nine minutes *less*. There is little question that the physical and social media environment that characterizes a household is strongly related to young people’s media exposure.

Heavy media users and media multitasking

There is little evidence that heavy use of one medium displaces time spent with other media — or for that matter, time spent on a variety of non-media activities. Indeed, we find that heavy use of any of four different media tends to predict heavy use of most other media.

The term “heavy media user” defines young people whose use of print, TV, video games, and/or computers is particularly high. Thus, the 19% of kids who read more than an hour daily are classed as heavy readers; the 20% of kids who report more than five hours’ daily TV viewing are grouped as heavy TV viewers; the 13% of kids who play video games in excess of an hour daily are heavy video game players, and the 16% of kids who spend more than two hours daily using a computer are heavy computer users. When these kids are compared to those defined as belonging to light or moderate use groups for each medium, heavy use of one kind of media is consistently related to heavy use of most other media. Thus, compared to moderate exposure kids, heavy print users report 1:44 more overall media exposure, heavy TV viewers report

2:18 more overall media exposure, heavy video game users report 3:01 more overall media exposure, and heavy computer users report 2:59 more overall media exposure. For each of these media, the differences between light and heavy users are even greater, and with few exceptions these differences emerge for each of the

individual media (i.e., not only is heavy computer use related to more overall media exposure, but heavy computer users also spend significantly more time with each individual medium).

At first glance, the high levels of overall media exposure attributed to heavy users of each of these media seem almost unbelievable. The mean overall media exposure among heavy computer users is 10:18, and among heavy video game players is 11:53 (and neither of these “total exposure” estimates includes time spent with the medium on which the classification is based). How could kids possibly devote that much time to media? The answer, of course, lies in the growing phenomenon of media multitasking. More and more, kids report using two, three, and even more media at the same time. That is, since most of our analyses are based on measures of exposure to each individual medium, a good deal of young people’s media time has been double-counted (perhaps even triple-counted), thus inflating the actual number of hours that kids spend with media. As noted earlier, on the basis of the diary data, we estimate that on average, 26% of the time that young people use media, they use two or more media simultaneously. It appears, however, that for heavy media users, 26% is a very conservative estimate. That is, kids who fall into the high exposure groups tend to be more likely to use several media simultaneously than their counterparts in the low and moderate exposure groups, and this is particularly true for heavy computer users and heavy video game players, the two subgroups producing

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the highest levels of overall media exposure (e.g., 33% of heavy computer users are “heavy media multitaskers,” compared to just 18% of heavy print users; see Table 7-H). In addition, kids who are classed as heavy media multitaskers overall (that is, kids who report more multitasking across several media) tend to report substantially higher levels of overall media exposure, as well as higher levels of exposure to most of the individual media. In short, to a large extent, kids classed as heavy users of TV, computers, or video games tend also to be heavy media multitaskers (the pattern does not hold for heavy readers).

Academic performance and media exposure

School grades are related to some media, but not to others. Kids who report school grades of mostly As and Bs, or mostly Bs and Cs, tend to report about 45 minutes less daily overall media exposure than kids who report mostly Cs and Ds or lower, but this difference is not statistically reliable. The negative relationship is significant for video game playing. In line with earlier research, the relationship between academic performance and time spent reading is *positive* and significant. That is, kids who report the lowest grades read substantially less than those who report the highest grades.

Personal contentedness and media exposure

The young people in our sample are generally happy and well-adjusted. Nevertheless, those who are least content spend more time with electronic media and less time with print than their more contented peers. Compared to the 13% of respondents identified as highly contented, the 18% of the sample classed as least contented spend significantly more time listening to music and playing video games; they also spend more (but not significantly more) time watching TV and using the computer. The result is that they spend a good deal more time with media overall: highly contented kids report 8:07 of overall media exposure, moderately contented kids report 8:22, and the least contented kids report 9:44 of overall media exposure.

Coda

The sheer amount of time young people spend with media makes it plain that the potential for media to influence significant aspects of their lives should not be ignored, particularly when we consider

that, because of media multitasking, for every hour young people use media they are exposed to 1¼ hours of media content.

Despite concerns that parents often express about the impact of media on their children as well as about the sheer number of hours kids seem to spend with media, the kids themselves do not report much parental effort to monitor or curb their media consumption. The number of TVs, video game consoles, VCRs, computers, and the like in families’ homes, not to mention in many kids’ bedrooms, the proliferation among kids of highly portable media players (e.g., laptop computers, handheld video games, MP3 players), the amount of time the TV is left on in the home and is on during mealtimes, the proportion of kids who say their parents do not establish rules governing their use of TV, computers, or video games — indeed, all these findings — point to the conclusion that the majority of parents either

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don’t feel their children spend too much time with media, or that they have simply given up. Given that young people who spend the most time with media also report high levels of time pursuing hobbies, hanging out with parents, and in physical activity, it may well be that parents (particularly parents of heavy media users) do not feel overly concerned about the amount of time their children spend with media.

To the extent that parents are concerned about media, however, our results indicate that they can have an impact on their children’s media behavior if they so choose. Parents who have kept media out of their children’s bedrooms, who turn off the TV during meals, who set (and enforce) rules about media use in general and TV in particular, tend to be parents whose children spend substantially less time with electronic media and more time reading.

Without question, this generation truly is the media generation, devoting more than a quarter of each day to media. As media devices become increasingly portable, and as they spread even further through young people’s environments — from their schools, to their cars, to their pockets (e.g., cell phones with TV, audio, print, video gaming, and online capabilities) — media messages will become an even more ubiquitous presence in an already media-saturated world. Anything that takes up this much space in young people’s lives deserves our full attention.