

The Changing Media Environment

Ulrika Sjöberg

Lecturer at the University of Lund

Abstract:

Young people are increasingly having access to their own TV-set, video recorder, or computer. New interactive digital media, like CD-Rom and Internet, are entering contemporary homes. Inspired by the ideas of a present European comparative study – the Himmelweit project, my thesis wanted to provide and understanding of Swedish children's and teenagers' use of screen-based electronic media, and how these are intertwined in daily life. It was shown that young people, who spent much time with the peer group or were active in various associations had a low media consumption. The opposite was true for the persons who preferred to stay at home.

[The Himmelweit study - An introduction](#)

[Method](#)

[A week in the lives of our children and youth](#)

[A sum up](#)

[References](#)

The Himmelweit study - An introduction

Today's children and adolescents are entering and encountering a new media environment. Besides the traditional electronic media (broadcast television, video and videogames) new media, - such as computer games, CD-Rom technology, interactive teletext, video on demand, the Internet and virtual reality, - are all making their appearance on the media arena. Thinking about this dramatical change in the increase of various media choices, a parallel can be drawn to the time when television was introduced and became a reality in children's lives.

Almost 40 years have past since Himmelweit and her colleagues (Himmelweit et al., 1958) conducted their classical study concerning children's use of television, - at the time a new domestic mass medium, which entered many British homes. Considering the similarities of a changing media environment Dr. Sonia Livingstone and Dr. Gaskell at the Department of Social Psychology, at London School of Economics, initiated in 1995 the international collaborative project "Children, Young People and the Electronic Media" in order to replicate the main aspects of the Himmelweit study. The countries involved in the project, besides Great Britain and Sweden, are Denmark, Finland, Holland, Germany, Flanders, Switzerland, France, Italy, Spain and Israel.

The research foci of the comparative project is on children and young people within the age group 6-17 years old, with different backgrounds and technical literacy skills, and their use of screen-based electronic media. The emphasis is especially on the new media, how these are interpreted and integrated in the daily life, and its various impacts on the individual, the family and society. To gain knowledge about the role of social class, education etc. in determining media access, knowledge and use, some countries will also include the parents of the younger children in their study. A multimethod approach is adopted, where both qualitative and quantitative methods are utilized.

Based on an empirical study, which was inspired by the ideas of the Himmelweit II project, this article discusses and explores three research questions: How are electronic media intertwined and related to other leisure activities? Are these media used individually or collectively? And where (at home or outdoors) does the Swedish child and teenager utilize different electronic media.

Studying media in the context of school, leisure and family implies the unity, plurality, spontaneity and ecological dependency of human activity, surrounded by a constantly changing reality (Georgoudi & Rosnow, 1985). The media user is not isolated but is rather living in a dynamic environment, where

mutuality between the two prevails.

Describing how children and teenagers structure their everyday life, - concerning time, physical space and activities - it may, from an international perspective, be worthwhile to make the reader aware of the kind of public environment the Swedish young people live in. Lots of resources have been invested by the government and the local authorities in the effort to make sure that public spaces are safe and useful for the citizens. Even if crime, drugs and violence is increasing, especially in the largest cities, children and adolescents are able to spend much of their leisure time outdoors in public environments. The communities are also supporting recreation centers, leisure clubs and other activities for young people. In 1995, 80 % of all Swedish youth were, in some way or another, engaged in these kinds of clubs or activities (Lieberg, 1995). There is, though, a difference for the teenagers who live in large and medium cities and those living in the suburbs. The former can easily find public spaces where they can meet and retreat with their friends. Recreation centers and youth clubs in the suburbs, however, are not offering as many activities as before and in worst case they have been forced to shut down (Ibid). One is, however, not to forget that living in the north of Sweden, which is very sparsely-populated, having several miles to the nearest neighbour, is making it rather difficult for young people to get involved in various activities.

Lieberg (1995) mentions two tendencies when discussing teenagers and public space. He calls the first tendency the process of the "dangerous city". Urban public life has become weakened and institutionalized. This is partly due to the fact that indoors activities, like watching video or playing computer games, are making the youth not so inclined to participate in various outdoors activities. Spontaneous play has been replaced by the rapidly growing organized associations. Youth groups are today smaller in number and are utilizing fewer places in the neighborhood. The second tendency is the process of the "fun city", where some parts of urban life are adopting new forms. The urban center is expanded by the increase of cafés, bars, restaurants etc, and shopping centers, supermarkets and sports and entertainment centers are all examples of (have all become) new public places for the adolescents (Ibid).

Looking more specifically at the individual and his or her media use there has, according to Weibull and Anshelm (1991), been two kinds of changes. First, there has been a change from a collective media use at home, to a more collective media use outside home. Secondly, there has simultaneously been an opposite trend of increased individualization in media use.

In Sweden the place for media use has traditionally been within the household. The media consumption was until the first half of this century a group activity. All family members utilized the same media, shared the same newspaper, listening to the same radio program and watching the same TV programme. The entrance of a second radio channel in 1963 and the increasing popularity of the transistor encouraged a more individual use of media. The transistor made it possible for the individual to take ones radio wherever he or she wanted, something not even the TV could accomplish. This function of mobility is of great importance, especially for the young people (Roe, 1981). As more and more households have multiple sets of radio, TV and stereo, for example, in the bedroom or/and in the child's own room, the family member has increased its opportunities of making ones own program choices, and to either view or listen alone or in company (Gahlin, 1989; Reimer, 1993). It is here we discern the second change, the increased individualization in media use. This tendency can best be seen in the video, giving the individual greater control, both when it comes to the time of viewing, of available choices of viewing material, and with whom one will watch (Roe, 1981). Weibull and Anshelm (1991) state that the increased individualization in media use is the result of two parallel trends, the declining importance of traditional social institutions (i.e. the family) and the technological development of media equipment. Other factors affecting a person's willingness to acquire various media, such as, age, gender, family circumstances, place of residence, and education should also be taken into consideration (Johnsson-Smaragdi, 1988).

Electronic media use outside the household was possible with the transistor radio, walkman and the portable computer etc. (Weibull & Anshelm, 1991). We are today in a situation where the medium is not any more deciding the place for utilization. This, however, is not something new. We must not forget the traditional media, like books, magazines and newspaper, which are not only to be read indoors, at home. An example of the latest trend, that is, collective media use, outside home, is the popular cybercafé. An opportunity is here given to explore the world of computers, and to surf on Internet. It is a café where like-minded people meet to socialize and to exchange experiences.

Method

The study on which I report is based on 74 diaries from four primary schools (in the age group 8/9 year old) and 35 ones from three secondary schools (in the age group 15/16 year old). The pupils wrote the diary for a week, emphasizing their mediarelated activities. The schools were all located in the south of Sweden, either in a city (Malmö, with 245 699 inhabitants), or in a smaller community (Svedala, with 17 938 inhabitants). The younger children wrote the diaries at school, where the teacher helped them, while the youth wrote the diaries in their spare time. Before handing out the diaries to the primary schools, seven 8 year old children tested the diary. Unfortunately, only 35 diaries were handed in by the adolescents, answering to about half the sample. As for the children 74 diaries were completed, with a few undone due to sickness.

In the final analysis, however, I included all the diaries from the youth but only those (43 in number) from the children who were selected for the group interview. As a complement to the diaries I also conducted 14 group interviews, with four to six persons included in each. This second part of my study, focus on the gratifications children and youth receive from electronic media, how these are perceived, and if it is possible to discern the dimension of activity or passivity. For further study on this issue see "The Changing Media Environment - a study of children's and adolescents' use and perception of electronic media, in their everyday life".).

The method of diary let me gain insight into how mediarelated activities are intertwined in children's and youth's everyday life. The diaries that I used in my study were structural and purposeful designed in the sense that they were provided with an example, helping the participants to understand what I was after and to stress that it did not involve an ordinary diary with personal secrets and thoughts. To make this even more clear instructions were given on what to focus on when writing the diary. When writing about ones media use three aspects were to be considered: what kind of medium, the context in which a medium was consumed (alone, with family, friends etc.), and if they did something else while, for example, watching television or listening to music.

A week in the lives of our children and youth

To find answers to my questions -Where does the child and teenager utilize different electronic media? How are these media used (individually or collectively)? And how are electronic media intertwined and related to other activities?, I started off by making use of Lieberg's prior research work. Based on his empirical studies, Lieberg discerned three categories of Swedish youth: the peer group oriented, the association oriented, and the home oriented, which differentiated in how they spent their time and used physical space (Lieberg, 1992). When analyzing the diaries I found that Lieberg's home oriented category was to be split into two subgroups, the home & family oriented and the home & alone oriented, respectively. The home as a physical place constituted a central part in the lives of these children and teenagers. But, while the former was emphasizing the family, the latter group spent much of their time alone, and contained only older boys. It must be stressed that the categories are not mutually exclusive. The interviewees were rather showing tendencies of being engaged in a certain kind of activity more often than in other activities. One should always be careful to categorize people (and their activities) into nice and well formulated categories - life and people are not often that clearly defined. Within each category I then tried to answer my two more specific questions about media use. Before discussing the results it is worth mentioning that no regional differences between Malmö and Svedala appeared in the diaries. This may only be due to the small size of the sample. If more diaries had been included feasible differences may have been discovered between the two regions.

The majority of both the children and the adolescents were to be found within the home and family oriented category. This is perhaps not so strange for the younger children as their parents play a central role in their lives, serving as teachers, playmates and caregivers. For the youth this group was dominated by girls. One can only speculate about the reasons for this profound sex difference. It may be a result of the traditional sex-role standard, with the girls being raised and encouraged to be more nurturing and sensitive to the needs of others. They are putting the family in focus and being more involved with household chores compared to the boys in the same age (Shaffer, 1994). Another explanation may be that the girls who belong to the home and family oriented category were ambitious and keen on doing their homework, or not having any difficulties to write some pages in the diary. Regardless of this bias in the responses it is not the number of persons, who fall within each of the categories, that are of concern to us. It is rather the examples of evolving patterns and tendencies, with its distinct characteristics, which should get all our attention.

1. The home and family oriented category

These children and teenagers were usually going straight to their homes after finishing school or from the recreation centre. At home, the days were permeated by family activities. They played with their brothers and sisters, accompanied them to their leisure time activities, like ballet, football, riding, or taking a walk with the dog. The younger children went with their parents to the supermarket or to the centre for shopping. The adolescents visited the centre if they had to make an errand for the family, such as, buying groceries or clothes. They also took the time to chat and discuss with their parents. On the weekened some kind of activity was engaging the whole family, which could be everything from a trip to working in the garden. The youth were not likely to go out on Friday or Saturday evening. The evenings were instead spent either at home, alone or with the family or a friend, or staying the night at a friend's house. Figure 1 and 2 illustrate how a typical week may look like in a child's and an adolescent's life, who both fall under the home and family oriented category.

The media use of both these children and youngsters was characterized by the combination of a wide range of media, - TV, video, TV- and computer games and music, - in everyday life. Even if they were now and then utilizing a medium alone, it was more common to use different media with the family or friends, thus using media collectively, at home. The media were smoothly intertwined with ones other activities and duties. Perhaps it was here a matter of supplement (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989), where media use was incited by family activities. Media use had in itself become an appreciated activity, which brought the family together. The media, especially music, among the youth were often functioning as a secondary activity, while one was getting dressed in the morning, cleaning, doing schoolwork, eating, chatting with friends, reading a newspaper or a book etc. This urge for music among teenagers could also be seen in the use of a walkman, making it possible to listen to music on the way to and at school, when one was out jogging etc. This use points to that the home and family oriented youth is also showing a tendency of consuming media individually, outside home. It is a well known fact that listening to music is increasing rapidly during adolescence. Karl-Erik Rosengren (1994) found that the amount of listening to music almost doubled from age 11 to 15.

2. The home and alone oriented

I found in my study a few older boys (please notice that it was only boys who were referred to this category) who seemed to spend much of their time alone at home. As this category only contained a small number of boys it is worth studying further the actual composition of the group, perhaps it is also including girls. These boys were not engaged in any organized activities, and even if the home was their haunt in everyday life they were not doing things together with the other members of the family. This group was not hanging out with a lot of friends on a regular basis. Instead, it appears that their days after school and on the weekends were filled with various media. The week of a 16 year old boy, who spent much of his time alone at home, is shown in figure 3.

There were both those boys who had a very one-sided media use and those who combined a wide range of different media during the week: TV, video, computer games, Internet, newspapers and books. Like with the home and family oriented category music was often in the background - either from radio or a CD - while eating, doing homework, reading the newspaper or playing a computer game. But no matter if one used a few or many different media, the point is that these older boys seemed to utilize media as their main spare time activity. These boys were, in other words, utilizing media individually, at home. It is probably within this category that one can discern and talk about some kind of displacement or substitute (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989) when describing the relation between these boys' media use and their lack of involvement in other activities. We can though not draw any conclusions about the direction of this relationship. Is it the absence of other activities that calls for various media? Perhaps it is the other way round, where heavy media use reduces other activities?

3. The peer group oriented

The peer group oriented children and youth met their friends regularly after school. The children were often playing outdoors, while the adolescents were usually not doing anything particular besides hanging out and having fun. This prominence of the peer group was also visible during the weekened. The teenagers were rarely at home on Friday and Saturday night, perhaps one went to a party, the main thing was that one did something with ones peers. Due to their young age the children were not often going to a disco in the evening but were instead seeing their friends at home. To get a further picture of what a week may look like for the children and the adolescents, who were classified as peer oriented, two diaries of an 8 year old boy and a 16 year old girls are illustrated in figure 4 and 5. As can be seen from the figures, the whole week was coloured by the presence of the peers.

Focusing on how the peer group oriented persons' use of media could look like some differences were discernible between the two age groups. A major difference was that the teenagers were not very often using media in the company of their friends. This, however, was more typical for the children, who played games on the TV or on the computer, and to a lesser extent, watched a video or a TV program with friends. Hence, the adolescents in this category used the media individually, at home, while the younger children often did this collectively, with a friend either at home, or at one's friend's house. Even if the children used some media together with peers the week was dominated by either outdoors activities like, for example, riding rollerblades, playing football, bandy on the playground, building a hut, or by doing something indoors. After a day with one's friends, and after having supper with the family the TV set got (during the weekdays) the youth's attention. Thus, it is within this group that we find the adolescents who had a highly one-sided media use. This pattern was also shown among the children but was not that evident. Even if the television dominated, some children in this category were reading a book, comics, or listening to a CD before going to sleep. Again we cannot make any statements about causality when considering the relationship between media use and non-mediated activities among the peer group oriented. It may be the result of prevention (Rosengren & Windahl, 1989), where other activities reduce media use or be the case of leeway (Ibid), where a low use of media opens the door for other activities.

4. The association oriented

This category was limited in the way that merely persons who were very active, at least two days a week, in various organized activities were to be included. With organized I mean a scheduled activity (that is, during a specific day and time), which is given by some kind of organization or association, even if membership is not required. Only a few adolescents and children were assigned to this category. A common pattern for the members of this group was that they usually went to their activities after school. The diaries of a 9 year old girl and a 16 year old girl, who were active in different associations, are demonstrated in the figures 6 and 7.

When the youth got home from their activities they had dinner and the TV was usually turned on before going to sleep. In contrast to the teenagers, the children were often using various media (TV, TV-games, music) together with a friend or the family. The attentive reader may already have noticed that the media pattern among the teenagers has some similarities to the youth in the peer oriented group. When they came home after meeting one's friends during the day or after being to an organized activity, they usually watched television. This may illustrate another example of the types prevention and leeway. But compared to the peer group oriented person the peers were here being replaced (not completely of course) by organized activities. The adolescents in the two categories differed in how the rest of the day was spent. The association oriented youth were more together with the family, helping with the laundry, talking with their parents or going to the countryside for the weekend, and not that likely to go out on Friday or Saturday night. They were, though, also seeing friends but to a lesser extent compared to the peer oriented group.

Even if there were those adolescents in this group who first and foremost used television as the only medium most of the others had a more diversified media use in comparison to those in the peer category. One read magazines, newspapers, books, teletext, listened to radio or a CD sometime during the day, but not as frequently, though, as the home oriented person.

A sum up

After discussing each category, with its specific characteristics, a sum up of the findings may be in order. Figure 8 illustrates how each category above used media (individually or collectively), and whether this took place at home or outside home. I have also taken into account the emerging age differences within the peer group- and association oriented category. The categories have no fixed position in the typology, something that is represented by the broken line of the arrows.

The described study, and the four categories that evolved from it, will hopefully be an injection for new ideas and thoughts. It constitutes a starting-point when trying to discern and understand possible relations between media use and the circumplex of child and youth activities. However, when considering these kinds of relationships it is most crucial to keep in mind additional factors that influence both a person's consumption of media and the sort of activities he or she is involved in. A contextual perspective must be applied, letting us take a glimpse of the most intimate setting of an individual's life, such as, the family, the peer group, public places and institutions.

References:

- Gahlin, A. (1989). Tittarsituationen. (Publik- och programforskning Nr 16). Stockholm: Sveriges Radio.
- Georgoudi, M. & Rosnow, R. L. (1985): The emergence of contextualism. *Journal of Communication*. Vol. 35. No. 1, March, Winter, 1985, p. 76-88.
- Himmelweit, H.T., Oppenheim, A.N. & Vince, P. (1958): *Television and the child - an empirical study of the effect of television on the young*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press.
- Johnsson-Smaragdi, U. (1988): Audience response to the new media situation in Sweden. (Research paper in media and communication studies, Report No. 11). Lund: Lund university, Department of Sociology.
- Lieberg, M. (1992): *Att ta staden i besittning- om ungas rum och rörelser i offentlig miljö*. Lund: KF Sigma.
- Lieberg, M. (1995): Teenagers and public space. *Communication Research*. Vol. 22. No. 6, December, 1995, p. 720-740, Sage Publications, Inc.
- Reimer, B. (1993): Senmoderna miljöer. Massmedier och organisation av det privata och det offentliga. J. Fornäs, U. Boethius, Reimer, B (Eds.): *Ungdomar i skilda sfärer*. FUS-rapport Nr 5. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag.
- Roe, K. (1981): Video and youth: new patterns of media use. (Media panel, Report No. 18). Lund: Lund University. Department of Sociology.
- Rosengren, K-E. & Windhal, S. (1989): *Media matter - TV use in childhood and adolescence*. The United States of America: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Rosengren, K-E. (1994): Media use under structural change (Research paper in media and communication studies, Report No. 11). Lund: Lund University, Department of Sociology.
- Shaffer, D.R. (1994): *Social & personality development* (3rd ed.). The United States of America: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Sjöberg, U. (1997): The Changing Media Environment - a study of children's and adolescents' use and perception of electronic media, in their everyday life. (Master thesis in media and communication studies). Lund: Lund University, Department of sociology.
- Weibull, L. & Anshelm, M. (1991): Signs of change - Swedish media in transition. *The Nordicom Review of Nordic mass communication*, Vol. 12. No. 2, 1991. Göteborg.