Multimedia and Multitasking

Since the dawn of radio and television, researchers have explored how children are affected by electronic media, while parents and policymakers have considered the practical implications of media’s presence in children’s lives. In today’s world, however, the question of media’s impact on children has become much more complex. The term media itself, once used to refer to radio, television, and print, is now considered to include computers, video games, the Internet, portable music players, cell phones, and handheld devices that provide capabilities and access equivalent to all of the above. One of the results of the explosion of media platforms is the emergence of “multitasking” – children using several forms of media simultaneously.

Research presented in *The Future of Children* volume “Children and Electronic Media” suggests that multitasking is the most significant change in media use in the past several decades; rather than engaging in one form of media use (watching television), the vast majority of kids today use more than one media format at a time (watching television, text-messaging friends, listening to music, and writing a paper on the computer). While the total number of hours children spend engaged in media has not changed much in the past several decades, since children use more than one media source each hour, the total amount of media exposure has increased.

What does this mean in terms of the effect of media on children’s lives? Our ability to answer this question requires developing a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of multitasking itself.

- Among children ages eight to eighteen years, multitaskers are more likely to be girls, those who are heavy users of media, children who live in homes with computers, and children in homes where computer placement allows TV viewing.

- The computer is the media platform most likely to be involved in the multitasking process – *Future of Children* authors call it the “media multitasking station.”

- Television is also a factor in multitasking. Because television is the most widely used media platform, it is very likely that the TV is on while other media is being used.

Given the prevalence of multitasking, we may need to reconsider how we measure and research media use. For example, in 2004, eight to eighteen year olds reported media exposure levels (time spent with individual media content) more than 25 percent higher than media use levels (overall time spent with media). Put another way, by multitasking children were able to achieve 7:50 hours of media exposure in only 5:48 hours of media.
use. This may seem to be an efficient use of time, but we don’t really know what the effects of such multitasking may be on children’s long-term development.

Similarly, experts’ estimates of the amount of time children devote to radio, television, newspapers, or “the computer” no longer seem to capture young people’s media behavior; what were separate activities no longer seem to function independently, suggesting the need to reconceptualize the idea of media usage itself. New conceptualizations might take any of several forms. They could focus on the functions served by media exposure (diversion and pleasure, information seeking, social networking). They could look at the type of engagement different kinds of exposure elicits (active responding as with a video game; information-seeking as working on a homework assignment; content creation as when constructing a MySpace page; less active processing, as when watching a situation comedy or music video). Or they could classify exposure in terms of any of several content classifications (for example, fiction versus nonfiction, reality versus fantasy, social versus nonsocial.) Whatever form new conceptualizations of media exposure take, it seems clear that we can no longer limit analyses of media exposure just to classification by medium.

At the same time, even as researchers and policymakers attempt to create new categories for analysis in terms of children’s media usage and then to understand the implications of the multitasking phenomenon for children’s lives, the landscape of children’s media use continues to change. Media platforms are becoming much more portable, allowing children and particularly adolescents to engage in a variety of media wherever they want, whenever they want – outside the presence of any adults. According to researchers, just as the availability of television and the computer have supported the possibility of children’s media multitasking, the portability of media can be expected to transform children’s media use and our understanding of media’s influence on their lives in the future.


*Specific Chapters Referenced Include:*


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