

# New Generations – New Media

## *Some Thoughts and Reflections*

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Thanks to Ellen Wartella for a most informative and interesting presentation. The purpose of her project is said to be “to increase our knowledge about what the new media mean to the social, intellectual and physical development of children today”. Indeed an overwhelming wide and complex problem area, but I think her presentation has given all of us a lot of inspiration.

She has told us about what we know and what we need to know more about. The presentation gives an overview of results and plans for further questions to address. I think it will be useful as a platform for new projects in many research milieus interested in children and new media. I shall now comment on just a few issues. My main interest concerns the overall perspective and approach, but a few words will also be said about the methods.

Her focus is on the *influence* of the new media, and at the same time on the *use* of them. By this approach – a combination of research on uses and research on influences – she does exactly what I think needs to be done, but what to a large degree has been missing in the research on children and media during the past years. There are many interesting studies about *either* the influence *or* the uses or reception of a medium, but seldom combinations of the two.

Too many researchers on children and media still see the two perspectives – use or influence – as disparate and almost conflicting perspectives. They think that only studies of use and reception see children as active participants in communication, whereas studies of influences or effects view the children as passive receivers. The misunderstanding is astonishing when we think of what Wilbur Schramm wrote already in 1961 (!):

In a sense ‘effect’ is misleading, because it suggests that television ‘does something’ to children. The connotation is that television is the actor; the children are acted upon. Children are thus made to seem relatively inert; television relatively active. Children are sitting victims; television bites them. Nothing can be further from the fact. It is the children who are the most active in this relationship.

Newcomers are not aware of the real relationship between the two concepts, use and influence. Today we know that different ways of using a medium or a content lead to different influences, and vice versa. Children using a medium with the intention to learn

about a specific technical detail will for instance learn this, while others don't. And on the other hand: different influences of media at one point in time may lead to different use at another point in time. It has for instance been documented that heavy TV viewing in early childhood often lead to a higher viewer competence among children, they 'read' TV in a more sophisticated way and may also have a better understanding of the difference between fiction and reality.

The most important factors behind the use as well as behind the influence lie in a complexity of structural and cultural conditions of social and individual character. There is an ongoing interaction between uses and influences of media, throughout the years of childhood and youth. By studying this dynamic relationship we will have the best to learn more about "what the new media mean to the development of children today". The so called circular or spiral model is thus a more adequate model for the relationship between the child and the medium than the linear model.

An important reason for the lack of insight is that newcomers to research on this area today often come from other disciplines than media studies, for instance pedagogy, literature, cultural studies, anthropology etc. The researchers and their supervisors have their competence built on other theories than theories of media and communication. The researchers intend to use a multidisciplinary approach, but what they present as the media theoretical part of it usually is a stereotyped version of "the two competing traditions": studies of influences vs studies of uses of media.

On this background I welcome the work of Ellen Wartella as a good example of a project which combines the interest in influences and in uses of media (as well as in content).

The crucial question in this project is in my opinion the question about the ways in which the presentation of content shapes its acquisition and impact. You say: "In particular, we need to know whether there are differences in the way information is received from or given to different dialogue partners, including real people, fictional characters, computers, and intelligent computer agents".

To me it seems obvious that there are differences; the question is what are the differences? What does these differences mean to the way we communicate, to what we communicate and with whom we communicate? As a parallel to the changes (social, cultural etc.) related to other technological communication revolutions (printing machine, telegraphy etc.) the new interactive media change the communication pattern of today – among children and youth as well as in the society as a whole. Already now we register what seems to be an increase in total communication between many youngsters because of the mobile telephone. It has also been said that the emotional and social aspects seem to increase more than the informative part of the messages through these telephones. There is much speculation, and so far little knowledge. Probably the total communication pattern in society will be more differentiate, and we will see that the new media will replace the old ones on some areas but not on all. The old media won't disappear but change their functions.

To get knowledge about this many different approaches must be used. The presentation by Wartella of her project doesn't tell us much about methods. Many of us would have liked to get at least some tentative information about to which degree she plans to use different methods. Her overarching theoretical approach – with reference to Mead, Vygotsky, Bakhtin and other relevant theoreticians – show that she is aware of the extremely complex interactive processes she will have to analyse. She must focus on content, as well as use, reception and influence. It also shows that it will be necessary to use

qualitative methods, as well as quantitative. In line with this her reference to socialization theories points to the need for analysing the contexts of the communication acts, as well as the different subcultures of the youth. Communication doesn't take place in a vacuum – even as regards the new interactive media the old saying holds true: the context is as important as the text.

In many ways the project by Wartella is in accordance with the ideas of Kirsten Drotner, whom we heard earlier on this conference. She suggested we should undertake more integrative media research, and work more on conceptual confluence. She pointed to the need of including analyses of content as well as analyses of uses. Wartella includes not only the two, but all three elements – in her project. They all are important. It will take an enormous amount of heavy work until we reach a point we could call integrative research on children and media, but Wartella's project is to be seen as an extremely valuable contribution towards this goal.

