

Children Reading and Talking Television.

Anja Riitta Lahikainen, Jukka Partanen, Mira Roine, Satu Valkonen
University of Tampere, Finland

I Introduction and the purpose of the article

The following discussion with a five-year-old boy took place 18.4.2003, about a month after the war in Iraq had started.

(I=the interviewer, C=the child)

Extract1:

I: Well, we can talk about TV a little later with you, but...

C: I don't like tanks.

I: Have you seen them on TV?

C: Yeah.

I: And you think that they are scary?

C: Yeah.

I: How scary are those tanks?

C: Very scary.

I: Very scary. Where have you seen them?

C: On TV.

I: OK.

C: I have seen tanks during wartime on television.

I: You mean in the news?

C: Yeah. And I'm also scared of cannons.

I: Those, you mean the war and the news?

C: I'm scared of cannons.

I: Cannons? OK...

C: A lot. ... Cannons.

I: Have you seen those cannons in TV also? Same as the tanks?

C: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

C: (Mutter, mutter) I'm scared of war aeroplanes.

I: You have seen them in the same programs?

C: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

C: (Blows a raspberry)

I: What about those war aeroplanes, how scary do you think they are?

C: Very scary.

I: Very scary.

C: Because they drop bombs ... all over.

I: Right. Have you watched these news with someone else?

C: My mom won't ever let me watch them, although I do anyway.

I: Mmmmm. They show that kinds of things, that's probably why your mother won't let you watch them.

C: I've watched the video Hercules, and there was these titans and monsters with many heads and there was, there was a centaur, and there was Hercules and there was Hades, and there was Hera, and there was, mmm, there was...

As the extract above illustrates, children do not live in isolated territories protected by their parents and caretakers as psychological reductionist models of childhood have described (James et al., 1998). More than ever, social change has made it impossible for adults to maintain control over children's socialization by educational means and by a few significant others. In other words, the world of children is different from that of adults – evidently much more so in our time than ever before. This growing differentiation is due to several factors.

Firstly children spend less time with their parents nowadays, because in affluent countries both parents are often working outside the home. For example in Nordic countries 80% of the mothers belong to the workforce. Even wage work of mothers with young children has become common in Finland already after the industrialization took place following the 2nd World War. (Kristiansson, 2001)

Consequently there is an increasing need for children to be continuously reorienting themselves because of the increased differentiation of social arenas. They have increasing numbers of contacts, more social interactions and more mediated experiences outside their families. Because children and their parents do not share their experiences in everyday interaction as much as they used to, it is challenging for parents to remain informed how their child is actually getting along. (Dencik, 2001.) This is one of the reasons why children's worlds are largely unknown to adults.

Secondly children's culture is diverging increasingly from adult concerns. More and more cultural products are produced solely for little children. The market has realized the status of children as potential consumers. Various commodified characters, plots, places and objects fill the imaginations and talks of children. Much of these subjects aren't easily communicated to fathers and mothers. It may come as a surprise to parents that there apparently is a creature called "Bionicle" and it wants to destroy the world with his hands which are actually weapons.

Thirdly children's culture is not only commodities created by adults and then sold to children. Children's culture is also the active and inventive application of those commodities. During play and in talk children modify, reinterpret and tame the different objects of their play and talk. They negotiate the meanings of "Bionicles", "Pokemon's" and "Bratz" etc. and teach each other how to play with them and how to talk about them. Also in this process their world becomes differentiated from the adult world. Commodity production invades children's lives, but does not determine it. And as Ana Carvalho has demonstrated, there are also cultural complexities which are transmitted exclusively among the children themselves and which have no adult input at all, such as games and flying a kite (Carvalho, 2004). Children's cultures are worthy of study in their own rights (Prout & James, 1997).

Especially electronic media have become part of the daily life of children and multiplied richness of their everyday surroundings. The media of communication supply a never ending flow of images and sounds, which compete with and change the contents of primary face to face relationships. Neil Postman (1985) was probably the first one to consider how this increasing media supply conceivably affects the lives of children. However, the transformation of childhood due to electronic technology has remained largely unexplored despite its vast and growing importance. We must also admit that the older media research is becoming obsolete because of

1. the rapid changes in program-contents,
2. the advanced technologies which make both the picture and the sound richer, more explicit and clearer, more packed with details,
3. the increasing number of different electronic equipment available at homes,

4. and of the increasing number of channels available also for children.

From the point of view of young children transformations of media-world can be usefully divided into three separate groups of phenomena. First, the informationalization of society including rapid and risky expansion of information technologies, globalization and changes in the patterns of family and working life; secondly, the over-all increase of both preferential and uncontrollable media exposure in the various domestic or institutional settings, (e.g. day-care) and thirdly, the transformations refer to the novel experiences and feelings, from the dreadful to the blissful, mediated by the media. In using images instead of and besides the words, television's importance for younger children with limited language capacities is intensified. (Castells, 1996-1998; Webster, 1995; Mustonen, 2000; Herkman, 2001; Buckingham, 1991; 1996; 1997; Cantor, 1991; Kytömäki, 1999).

Paradoxically children themselves have become experts of themselves and of childhood in the increasing differentiation of children's and adults' worlds. By using children as informants, we try to find out how the above mentioned split between the young and the adults is changing. More exactly, we explore media as machinery which intervenes and interferes in complex ways in the processes of social-emotional and communicative competences and explorations of children and the provision and management of care by means of parents and other professional or non-professional persons. In doing that we describe how the media penetrates young children's lives. Descriptions are given on two levels. Firstly, at the level of everyday life we demonstrate children's media exposure and social interaction related to media. At the second level we illustrate children's media-derived experiences.

As a basic assumption we see the child as an active, novelty seeking and explorative creature, and as interactive as the adult (although the forms of interaction differ) in so far as his/her basic safety is established (Dunn, 1988; Light, 1993; Bowlby, 1969). There is growing evidence of that. Children use their capacities and senses all the time to construct their own views of the world and people in it as well as their own culture and identity.

This research topic gets its special importance in the frame of child development. The first years of life are constitutive to the formation of identity, orientation toward self and other people, and the structures of attachment and exploration. (Giddens, 1991; Bruner and Haste, 1987; Valsiner, 1983; Bowlby, 1969). The very rapidity and transience of the changes in the media environment and contents pose challenges for research as well. Recent findings reveal many ill-effects of children's television-viewing (Owens et al., 1999; Singer et al., 1998, Pfefferbaum et al, 2001).

II Whom are we speaking of?

Our data is based on random sample of 110 five to six year-old children in Helsinki, which is the capital of Finland. The children were interviewed using previously developed child-interview-technique (see Lahikainen et. al, 2003).

The reasons for concentrating on five to six year-old children are various. For the following reasons there is a lack of information of what the world of little children is like. Firstly, children of this age are in their own way difficult to interview, because they do not express themselves as skilfully as older children. And secondly they may find it difficult to focus on adult initiated themes for long periods. This age group is also in an important phase of life because they still need a lot of attention and guidance, but they have not yet entered the disciplined environment of school. And the fourth reason for concentrating on this age group is that insecurity developed at this age will greatly affect

the future success of a child. However, with carefully crafted settings and patient interviewers, it is possible to acquire the confidence and trust of child interviewees, and begin to learn about the insecurities and hopes defining the world of contemporary childhood.

III A path to child – Interviewing process

The steps we took to construe a confidential non-authoritarian relationship with the children for the interview is described as follows:

Table 1

Steps to create contact with the child

Names and addresses of parents from population register, random sample

An **information letter** to the parents of the children in the sample

(it was made clear that participation is research voluntary). Sampling frame consisted of 164 children born between 1 Jan 1997 and –31 Dec 1998.



Introduction of the topic

What was told to the objects?

- computer has picked your child to a study to present 5-to 6-year old children
- the study concerns children's well-being
- child will be interviewed



The **interviewer calls the parents;** (we failed to reach 26 families by phone)

Parents decide whether they are going to participate or not; (9 families refused to participate)
It was made clear also to the children that participation



explanations for refusing
asking parents to co-operate in preparation and encouragement of the child
an appointment for the date and place of the child interview

isn't compulsory



Child interviews (at home or day-care centre)



social network
fears and views on TV

and

Parents filled out four questionnaires
(110 consenting families)



child's TV viewing, sleep
quality and quantity, psychiatric symptoms and background factors

Table 2 Interview process

<u>Structure of the interview</u>	<u>Motivation of the child</u>
<p>*Introduction -positioning the child as informant: <i>"I came to interview you, because we adults do not know, how it is to be a child nowadays"</i></p>	<p>*thank the child (verbal and nonverbal)</p>
<p>*Key questions</p> <p>- social network: <i>"Who are your important persons?"</i> show - Child puts his/her important persons on target diagram: the child him/herself in the middle, other persons on the circles around the nucleus. The nearer the nucleus the person is situated atmosphere on the diagram, the closer he/she is to the child.</p>	<p>*encourage the child</p> <p>*show acceptance in other ways *repeat child's answers: you have listened to him/her *emphasize child's significant status as informant *create peaceful</p>
<p>- fears <i>"All people are afraid of something, even the adults. But I do not know, what you are afraid of, I am very interested in knowing"</i></p>	<p>*follow the child's own rhythm; if the child is, for example, shy give him/her as much he/she needs.</p>
<p>-TV <i>"Have you learnt something from television that you wouldn't otherwise have done?"</i></p>	

IV Media exposure and information flow and children's interpretation

Before we focus on children's talk, we'll shortly introduce you the media-world our children are implemented in, as the parents have described it to us (in the questionnaire concerning media exposure and information flow at home). What did the parents actually tell about TV-watching of these children?

Table 3 Children's media-world

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Media exposure of the children in the study

(according to their parents) (N=111)

TV at home 99,1%, two or more TV sets 58 %

TV is open on average 27.7 hours a week, 4 h a day

TV open during the child's waking hours, on average 2.7 h a day

Children watch TV 1.3 h a day on weekdays, 2.0 h on Saturdays and 1.9 hours on Sundays.

Exposure to passive TV viewing¹ is about 1.4 h a day (on weekends slightly more than on weekdays)

In reality children are actually more involved with the electronic world than their parents tell, because they cannot follow their children's doings actively enough the entire day. The parents simply don't know everything. In addition they often embellish the reality when they answer to the researchers' questions and so on. Concerning our research project, it is also worth noticing, that we did not ask how much the child in question or his/her siblings and parents spend time e.g. watching videos, playing video- or computer games, surfing the Internet and so on. That is because we were mainly interested in children's TV-viewing habits. Interestingly, however, during the interviews we noticed the young children do not differentiate between TV-programs and videos or video-games. For young children television means everything which comes from its screen.

In the following we describe children's TV-experiences from the perspective of saliency of the experiences. By saliency we mean two things: 1.) salient things either come first in order when the interviewer opens discussion about fears or they are 2.) spontaneously told stories about TV without the interviewer having asked them. There are at least two sources for a thing to be salient: it dominates child's thinking or it has to do with the time of the arousal of the fear; the latest fears in arousal are remembered first. Next we demonstrate salient things which appeared in children's talks.

In the first case of saliency the interviewer doesn't ask about media fears but fear interview in itself motivates children to tell television related fears. In other words, we have looked here if the children themselves raise television-related things in to the discussion. These salient contents of media fears are illustrated mainly with direct extractions from discussions with the interviewer. They are used to illuminate some typical features in the meetings of children and interviewers. These aspects of the interview-situations are commented later.

After this we'll take a look on children's own reflections of media influence. We describe children's answers to questions: what have you learnt from television and what have you got to know from television?

1. TV-screen as fear-provoker

Some children start to tell about fears related to television programs immediately after the key question. "All people are afraid of something, even the adults, but I do not know, what you are

¹ Passive TV viewing is here defined as meaning that "the child does not pay active attention and is not the one for whom the content is intended". The term was operationalized as the amount of time that the TV is on at the child's home when he/she is awake but not actively watching.

afraid of, I am very interested in knowing”. The object of the fear may differ, but it is always explicated in discussion that the fear originates from a TV-program or a video.

Extract 2: dramatic event from the video

C: Well, if a head is cut off, then, uhmmm, then

I: What is cut off?

C: The head

I: Head is cut off, *mhm*, where can such a thing happen?

C: I saw it on a video

I: Do you remember the name of the video where you saw it?

C: Mmmmm, no I don't remember it now.

I: OK. Do you remember what happened in that video or what characters there were?

C: There was some people, and some guys thought that one Esmeralda was a witch, although she wasn't.

I: Were there other characters whose names you could remember?

C: I don't remember the others.

I: Was it a cartoon?

C: Yes.

More often when starting to speak about television, children mention a name of a frightening figure in a film or a video or the name of the film, such as “Herluket”, “Alandin Alin Alandina Alan”, ”Herkules and blue horse”, ”Yyviks” (Cubix) or just plainly “ape”; or they are generalized as grokes, a monster in the Moominvalley books and series.

The frightening figures stem from cartoons and they represent evil. Interesting in the following extract is that the child tells that the frightening figure picked up is present everywhere outside the watching situation.

Extract 3:

I: Now we are going to talk about those things that scare you, because you're a five year old...

C: I know.

I: Like I mentioned, I don't necessarily know about them because I'm a grown up...

C: I know what's scary-

I: What then?

C: Groke

I: Stroke, no, what was it?

C: Groke

I: Groke. (Presents the fear lines)

C: (Points out to small fear)

I: That Groke scares you a little. Where are you when you are scared by those grokes?

C: Everywhere.

I: Everywhere.

C: And the groke is green.

I: Have you ever seen a groke?

C: No. I have seen on a video, I think, or a film or something. I just know.

Also children may mention first the nightmares, and thereafter explain that they come from TV-programs.

Extract 6:

C: I know one – scary dreams and then
 I: [You could tell me what things you find frightening. You said scary dreams, what are they about?
 C: Well mhm, all the other bad things or something.
 I: What bad things?
 C: Programs
 I: Mhm. What kind of programs?
 C: Well, at least Shock and shiver
 I: What?
 C: Shock and shiver
 I: Now I don't understand.
 C: Shock and shiver, is just so, it's a little scary.
 I: Is that a program, Shock and what?
 C: Shiver
 I: Oh. I have never heard of it.
 C: It is on on Saturdays
 I: What is scary about it?
 C: They eat in it, there are evil tales in it and so on and then there is a kind of, at least once there was a program about crocodiles tears in it. Shock tales.
 I: I see, Look I have...
 C: [And then there is Uuvix (Could mean a creature called Cubix)
 I: Uuvix mhm
 C: That's on every Saturday, too.

Most of the fears that a child reported are related to those programs what they watch with or without adult consent or then they were connected to programs which their parents/other relatives or other adults watch and the child sees something frightening by accident. It has also been demonstrated that so called passive television viewing can elicit fears in little children (Paavonen, 2004).

2. Spontaneously told media stories

Children may also start spontaneously to speak about programs by interrupting the interviewer as it happened in the case of fear of war which was mentioned in the beginning. However, not all child-initiated talks about television concern fears. Even most positive thoughts can be associated to television. These extracts highlight the things children themselves set great store by. These are the things they consider somehow significant when talking television.

Extract 10:

In the beginning of the interview:

I: ...and in the end we'll talk about nice things.

C: No, I want to talk about them now.

I: If I explain this to you first, and then we'll see about that later.

C: What xx xx let me see, what do I think that are nice things.

I: Well, can you tell me?

C: Uhm, Sandman and Pocahontas *mmm* and then Barbie.

I: Barbie.

C: Yeah. And then (...) I don't know.

I: What?

C: I don't remember the name.

I: Mhm. What happened in it?

C: There were all the children, like, and it and it once in that program it fell down and it said that children, don't lose this ever, and then when it fell down from the wheel of a tractor (...).

Children may also have favourite figures which play an important role in their everyday life. In the first part of the interview, the child's social network was discussed and children described it by setting figures representing their important figures to the diagram where they themselves were situated in the centre. Then some children wanted to connect figures from fiction to that world of their important social network.

Extract 7:

(The child informant is considering other close and important people to herself and their place in the diagram.)

I: Well, who else would you locate there, children or adults?

C: Well, we have seen The Junglebook 2 and I thought that Shere Khan was scary, so I would put only Baloo

I: What?

C: Baloo, he...

I: Is it some TV...

C: Yeah, he's got white claws and pale gray belly and he's dark here (taps his back) in the back, and then he has also in his toes, he has no toes and then there are claws.

I: Oh!

C: And here...

I: Is it...

C: There's only three.

I: OK. What was his name again?

C: Baloo

I: Baloo, where is it, is it in some...

C: And it is like gray, dark gray.

I: Is it some movie?

C: Dark gray here and here and then here he has light gray, and here it is red and his hair is also dark gray and this.

I: Yes, was it some movie, Juha?

C: Yeah.

I: Yeah.

C: At the cinema.

I: Well, was it scary?

C: Well, in the end it was quite funny, because I thought, I wished that Baloo would win because Baloo always beats all the tigers, except in the first Shere Khan beats Baloo, but there Baloo says that he was only resting.

I: I see. Do you think it was a funny movie?

C: Yes, except I think that Shere Khan is stupid.

I: OK, but wasn't it scary if they were fighting in it?

C: No.

I: I see.

C: It was cool when Baloo threw it and the stone mask broke and the Shere Khan fell down and was put in gaol.

I: So that's what it was like. Did you go to see it with your mother?

C: Yeah. And then there was (name, name and name of little brother) and me and mom.

I: So it was the lot of you.

C: Yeah, but no-one else.

I: OK. Let's return to this.

(They continue to place close people in the diagram.)

C: I would like to have a baby tigger as a pet, so I am imagining that these are baby tiggers. (He puts two cats in the diagram, representing tiger cubs.)

I: You can put them in there, but let's now think about real people, who do you...yes, put the tiger cubs in there, right, can you think of any other children or adults who are important to you?

C: Yes, this is Jussi (his baby brother) and this is, no, nothing else now.

For some children it was difficult to report important people in addition to their parents and closest relatives/friends but quite easy to tell what else is as important in their lives.

Extract 9:

I: Well, do you have any other close child friends when you are not here in the day care?

C: Uhmm, you mean at home?

I: Yes.

C: No, I don't think so, other than watching videos.

I: Watching videos is what you do at home, then.

3. Children's own reflections of media influence

Apart from fears, we also asked the children "what have you learnt from television?" It was quite easy for children to tell if they had ever learnt anything from TV but much more difficult to describe what they had learnt. They still completed the question well and demonstrated broad comprehension of their mediated learning.

Extract 20

I: Is there anything you have learnt from television?

C: Yeah, a new language.

I: A new language. Anything else?

C: Nope.

Extract 21

I: I've learnt a great deal. Is there anything you have learnt from television?

C: Yeah, nice things.

I: Can you tell me one?

C: Yeah, nice.

I: What kind of nice thing?

C: Mm, a nice thing is to bless and to pray for those who are ill.

I: This you learnt from television?

C: Yeah, nice things.

Question concerning learning represents adult-centric attitude originating from educational discourse, which we adults often draw on in our relationships to children. The extracts illuminate the children's varying reception of that positioning and their role-taking in that discourse. Worth noticing here is that we did not go into details when explaining what we mean by 'learning'. We only asked them 'what have you learnt' or 'got to know' from TV. In adult speech learning is mostly associated with something useful or desired. But as we will see, that is necessarily not the case when children are concerned.

Children's conception of 'learning' is not always corresponding with the adults' conceptualization. The child may also become very frustrated, when his/her verbal competencies do not allow him/her to describe the things the interviewer asks. The interviewer may become frustrated as well, when the discussion does not develop the way s/he has assumed in advance. To conclude, the learning may be a very blurred and diverse process, and not every part of it may be turned into explicit language.

Extract 23

I: Can you tell me, have you learnt anything from television?

C: Yes.

I: Well?

C: I've learnt to to wipe my face dry.

I: Learnt to to wipe your face dry. *Yeah* What do you mean?

C: It means that if your face is very wet, *Yeah* then you can wipe it off, it's like, then it will get dry.

I: Have you seen someone do that on telly?

C: Yeah. It was hard, when the light came on this, it's their porridge, but the machine threw porridge all over him, all the the time, hihihih

I: I see.

C: Because it, mm, there was someone had bitten off a bit of the wire.

I: Right.

C: It was flying there all the time, it it was like, there was not so much electricity, what he did, and there wasn't like electricity, so it burns all the time, maybe it got too hot.

I: What?

C: That machine, machine, mkhm, because the electricity was flying all the time.

I: Was that a scary part?

C: No, it was really funny.

Many children are, however, capable of telling concrete and understandable examples of learning by imitating activities seen in television, These include

i) Physical competencies:

For example: the child has learnt to stand on one's head, jumping, running, tricks: flips and somersaults, and artistic skills such as how to make a toyfrog.

Extract 18

I: Can you tell me, have you learnt anything from television programs?

C: Yeah I have.

I: Well?

C: Like this jumping.

I: You have learnt to jump on one leg.

C: Yeah, and this too.

I: You have learnt to run without moving.

C: Yeah, and then I can run fast, too.

I: So you have learnt that also, mhmm.

Or the acquired competencies can be even more dramatic or fantastic, as in the following example:

Extract 25

I: Is there anything you have learnt from television?

C: Well it's like, because there are like, that you can help others a great deal, and you don't always quite know how, then if someone was like hanging from a rope with his hand, and some lava was rising towards him, then you could save him because the rope would be tied to a tree, so you could pull him up. Maybe you wouldn't figure that out right away.

Imitation is not, however, the only means to learn new things from media. Another common benefit of watching television is simply

ii) Getting new information

This can include many different types of information, such as learning about different countries and languages, or like in this example, information about drugs.

Extract 26

I: Is there anything you have learnt from television? Have you found out some quite new things?

C: Well, I have found out new things sort of, like that there's this drug, that if a woman has had a baby, then, if she uses too much drugs then that baby will become sick, just like having the eyes of a dolly.

I: Mmm. This you found out from telly?

C: Yeah.

Also many rites and passages of different sub-cultures can become familiar through TV programs and they can be rehearsed at home. We call this media influence:

iii) Reception of scenes/scripts

In the following example, our informant is getting acquainted with hiphop culture.

Extract 27

H: Is there anything you've learnt from TV?

L: Mmmmm, like the one, one is like "Yo man!", and then it goes like this "Tsu, Ouch, I hurt my head!" (Acts out a TV commercial, where a young hip hop artist is rapping and recording his performance on a videotape. He gets too excited and hits his head in the video camera and falls down on the floor.)

I: Oh, you mean that commercial?

C: Yeah.

As we see, children's accounts of their learning experiences are not necessarily the same ones that adults perceive as notable learning. Children have their own conceptions of "learning" and these conceptions need to be analysed in depth.

V Children reading and talking television

We have approached children's relationship to television from two complementary directions and given examples both of children's spontaneous TV-talks and of children's answers to adult-centric questions of learning and education. Reading and talking television seem to be two very different things. Many children have difficulties to find words to describe their experiences with television despite their genuine efforts and the interviewers' honest support. However this preliminary analysis revealed a lot of things about TV influence and the role of electronic media in a child's life.

5-6-year old children have gathered a lot of both fictive and factual information through electronic media. Clearly that information leaves manifold imprints to children's memory which form more or less integrated pieces of their internal world. They seem to have back-flashes of happenings on the screen, fictive figures, scripts and imagined stories as well as more or less understood facts about inner life of mind.

It is obvious that children are definitely reading television and that television has an essential role in children's lives. Also it became clear that the adult interviewer easily becomes totally puzzled – not because the child articulates badly but because the interviewer does not know the programmes/videos the child is talking about. In order to be able to carry out a conversation at the same level with the child, the adult should spend hours daily to watch the programmes the children are watching. The children are now quite “abandoned” in the middle of the amount of happenings that are conveyed through the electronic media. They read it but they do not necessarily realize all that they see and hear and, even less, are they capable to describe it. Events on screens may confuse and frighten them because they just are not able to explain everything to themselves.

These glimpses to children's life will direct our study further. We are going to try to specify the relationship between real life and virtual world, which seem to have taken a larger role in children's life than earlier.

To become a competent member of his/her society, a child has to acquire different skills. Basically children learn facts about their physical environment by exploring it – by looking, listening, tasting, smelling and touching. They discover that things can be grasped, thrown, jumped over etc. They can go around things and see what is behind or inside them. They practice their skills by interacting with different objects, surfaces and places.

In addition children have to become aware of their social environment. Other people do not afford throwing or jumping on, but they offer company, help, guidance and support. According to Anthony Giddens the routines of day-to-day life are fundamental to even the most elaborate forms of societal organization. In the course of their daily activities individuals encounter each other in contexts of interaction with others who are physically co-present (Giddens 1986, 64). Erving Goffman has defined co-presence as the situation where people “sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” (1963).

In interaction with caregivers children learn what the environment affords not only to them selves but also to other people. Or as James J. Gibson has put it: "People are animated objects, to be sure, with complex affordances for behaviour; but they are more than that. People are not only parts of the environment but also perceivers of the environment. Hence a given observer perceives other perceivers. And he also perceives what others perceive. In this way each observer is aware of a *shared environment*, one that is common to all observers, not just his environment" (Gibson, 1974). In a shared environment adults carefully guide the attention and orientation of children towards different properties of environment.

Children also become aware of the norms and rules that direct and guide behaviour. Some actions are desired and applauded, others are prohibited or restricted. This way the child's social knowledge grows gradually. James M. M. Good has provided a preliminary list of the kinds of things arise out contexts of co-presence:

“Social knowers are aware:

of the properties of others
that they share such knowledge with others
that they acquire knowledge in the presence of others who do likewise
that they explore their environments in pursuit of their goals
that they coordinate their actions with those of others
that they manage impressions, save face, get embarrassed and angry
that they account for, justify and excuse their behaviour
that they are also observers of themselves and others
that they are speakers and listeners as well as lookers and seers”

However, children’s lives in modern societies can be described as exhibiting a growing absence of parents and a growing presence of electronic media. In a sense we could say that a child’s environment has become evermore *virtualized*. Interaction with television, DVD, computer, Playstation and such is different from interaction with people. We shall concentrate here on television.

Television is in itself a physical object. One can walk around it and look what’s behind it and try to lift it. But the magic of television is that there are programs projected on its screen in a continuous stream. One can interact with television by turning it on and off and changing channels. But it is useless to try to talk to it, because the characters on the screen do not respond. They do not appear to be co-present with the watcher, but with other screen characters. These characters go on doing whatever they are doing regardless of what the watchers hope or fear. This inability to intervene in television’s virtual activity positions people in a situation where they just look and listen. Leona Jaglom and Howard Gardner have observed that “between the ages of 3 and 4 years, children recognize the fact that the television world is in fact separate from their own. Its events do not actually exist in reality; they cannot be acted on directly’ (Jaglom & Gardner 45, 1981).

In media criticism this has sometimes been condemned as the central problem of television viewing. It seems to make people passive, “couch potatoes”. In more recent media studies the idea of a passive viewer has been largely abandoned (see for example Alasuutari, 1999).

In our data children appear very active television viewers. The activity is not so much interaction as *interpretation*. Children try hard to make sense of what is going on on the screen and it might mean. Why is it that so many behaviours which are forbidden for the child are so usual and regular for virtual characters? Why are the rules so different in television? To many of the questions raised by television programs children would need the help of adults. But children are also interpreting the virtual messages on their own and together with their peers. The meanings and uses of bionicles, bratz, Barbies and Kens, Moomin trolls and cubixes are negotiated and formulated during play, in day-care centers and schoolyards. This way children’s culture diverges from adult world. The fears and concerns of children can remain very obscure to parents. Moreover, the active nature of a child viewer can easily escape the panopticon of adult control. “My mom won’t ever let me watch them, although I do anyway”, reports one of our informants.

So what is a television for a child? It is a physical object of shared attention and a social object containing and transmitting messages about a world which in some respects is different from the child’s world and the same in some other respects. It is a mixture of ‘texts’ to be read and interpreted, and a source of lot of information to be talked about. What makes it different from a person is that it does not interact with the viewer nor does it rationalize what its messages mean.

Like adults, children attend to television in multiple ways. It can be a source of entertainment, an assistance for learning new things, a source of fears and anxiety or just a babble box to keep you company. Many different possible uses for television were mentioned in our data. It seems evident also that these categories of television use are not clear cut. An entertaining program can be also frightening, and yet contain valuable information for the child. Television can also help children to differentiate, interpret and rationalize the sources of pleasure and anxiety.

One positive feature of television for children is that it seems to play an important part in helping children to develop concepts of reality and fantasy. For example Bob Hodge and David Tripp have argued that 'far from the fantastic nature of cartoons causing confusion between fantasy and reality, the largeness of the gap is helpful to young children in building up precisely this capacity to discriminate' (1986, p. 9). Also, according to Howard Gardner and Patricia Morison 'the frightening status of certain fantasy figures may motivate children early on to master their reality status' (1978, p. 648). Learning to remind themselves of the fancifulness of a television programme may help children to distance themselves from emotional responses to disturbing scenes. It is widely noted that children tend to perceive fictional television as increasingly less real as they grow older.

Children's opinions about the reality of television programmes are not based solely on comparing specific representations with their knowledge of the 'real' world. They draw on their understanding of the *medium* of television. Otherwise, a documentary about an exotic country might seem as fantastic as a Digimon action cartoon. Maturing and experience are apparent in the development of children's use of what are normally referred to as the 'formal features' of the television medium as cues to the reality status of programmes (Hodge & Tripp, 1986, Fitch *et al.*, 1993, Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 2001).

It seems that even very young children can distinguish between different sources of anxiety. In our data fictional characters such as Baloo or Groke elicit different reflections than a baby of a drug addict or sick people who might be consoled with a prayer. In order to understand how children read and talk television and how they make sense of fiction and fact we need to listen to the children themselves.

People often expect that social scientists who study children and television have answers to question: how television affects children - but we don't. This is a frequently posed adult concern to which the answer is often constructed by negative terms. We feel that we should rather ask: What are the shapes and the outcomes of specific, situated encounters between children and television? How do children interact with television and affordances that television screen have? How do those affordances constrain such interactions?

APPENDIX I

Project description

Project: Children's Well-being and Media in Societal and Cultural Context

Leader: Prof. Anja Riitta Lahikainen, Univ. of Tampere

Researchers:

Inger Kraav; Professor of Education, Univ. of Tartu

Piia Korhonen, doctoral student, Univ. of Tampere

Ulla Matikkala, M.Pol.Sc., Unvi. of Tampere

Juulia Paavonen, M.D., B.Pol.Sc., Univ. of Helsinki

Jukka Partanen, Researcher, Univ. of Tampere

Marjo Pennonen, B.Pol.Sc, Univ. of Tampere

Mira Roine, doctoral student, Univ. of Tampere
Merle Taimalu, doctoral student, Univ. of Tartu
Satu Valkonen, doctoral student, Univ. of Tampere

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