Children and media

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Abstract: Focusing on main trajectories of development, this chapter analyses how children's relations to media have been researched within a mainstream effects paradigm, still dominating research and university studies in the United States and parts of Asia, and a more culturalist paradigm that has developed on the European continent from the 1980s on and taken root in many parts of the world. Examples are offered of key studies within each paradigm as a lever for identifying recurrent research issues and aspects of critique that have occupied scholars within the two paradigms. Finally, the chapter discusses major transformations in the research on children's relations to media, and it points to recent encounters between the two paradigms, encounters that are chiefly a result of deep changes in children's media practices. In briefly charting these transformations, the chapter illuminates how research on children's relations to media is ultimately deeply dependent upon what happens in children's own lives and in institutional ramifications that are not of their own choosing.

Keywords: children and media, media panic, media research traditions, media effects tradition, interpretive media and communication studies.

This chapter reviews how children's relations to media are studied. This has interested media scholars since the emergence of media studies after World War I. To chart these relations is in a sense to analyse the transformations of the field itself and to identify “a microcosm of media studies” at large, as Dafna Lemish has cogently noted (Lemish 2013). Focusing on main trajectories of development, this chapter analyses how children's relations to media have been researched within a mainstream effects paradigm that still dominates research and university studies in the United States and parts of Asia; and a more culturalist paradigm that has developed on the European continent from the 1980s on and taken root in many parts of the world. I offer examples of key studies within each paradigm and identify recurrent research issues and aspects of critique that have occupied scholars within the two paradigms. Finally, the chapter discusses major transformations in the research on children and media and points to recent encounters between the two paradigms – encounters that are chiefly borne out of deep changes in children's media practices. These practices are touched upon to illuminate how research on children and media is ultimately deeply dependent upon what happens in children's own lives and in the institutional ramifications not of their own choosing.

The term children need specifying. In most parts of the world, children’s lives have changed dramatically over the past hundred years, and they still vary tremendously if viewed on a global scale. For practical reasons, children are defined as individuals in the age band of 0–18 years old, which follows the United Nations Convention on
the Rights of the Child from 1989. It is acknowledged that age has not always been a key identifier of being a child and that the age limit of 18 remains contested across the globe.

The term media is equal need of specification. Following James Carey, I define media as technologies of communication and as e material and symbolic social resources (Carey [1989] 1992). They are concrete objects, often of an institutionalized and a commercial nature, that circulate messages in society. They are meaning-making and semiotic tools through which people relate to the world and to one another across time and space (Thompson 1995). Media encompass print, audio and visual channels whose signs (text, sound, image) are brought into alignment today because of their technological digitization.

This inclusive definition of media is important to hold on to, because researchers of children and media have focused on particular media at various points in time. This runs the risk of over-interpreting certain features in the relationship between children and media. Moreover, the definition provides a useful backdrop to mapping out the research traditions noted above. The effects tradition is based on an understanding of media as material conduits of messages by asking questions about what these messages are and who they impact. The culturalist tradition sees media as socially situated processes of meaning-making and asks questions about how meaning is shaped and shared under what circumstances. Finally, a wide-ranging understanding of media offers a foundation to understand how we may study current media cultures, where complex and global constellations of media, data, platforms and communication networks make up children’s relations to media.

1 Why study children and media?

As noted, media scholars have always been interested in children’s relation to media, and they are not alone. The gradual extension in modernity of childhood as a specific phase of life is linked with the development of media genres that are aimed at children, such as children’s books and magazines (Drotner 1988, 2013). Although both modernity and childhood play out very differently across demarcations of class, gender, ethnicity and geographic locale, their historical co-existence is worth noting because it sets the stage for repeated outbursts of public attention to children and media. This, in turn, offer important ramifications for the types of issues that researchers address.

Public attention is often spurred by, and focused on, the latest media on offer, whether it is popular magazines and, later, comic books, film, television, computer games, mobiles and social network sites. Public expressions of interest are largely normative and display what Joli Jensen calls “discourses of optimism and pessimism”. (Jensen 1990) These binaries range from positive claims that new mediums advance children’s learning capacities, the formation of their personal character, and a well-rounded
world view to negative claims that the very same mediums catalyzes anxieties, causes health problems and generates narrow mindsets in children (Luke 1990; Drotner 1999).

Researchers are affected by public discourses, not just because these discourses are levers of selective research funding, but, more fundamentally, adults researching children conduct exercises into their own future. The basic relations between adults and children inevitably involve issues of power, responsibility, authority, subversion and accept. These resonate as tacit or explicit ethical tenets in research as well as everyday life. Scholars may and should be reflexive about these issues as they may impact on their research interests, the types of research questions they find pertinent, and their research results.

2 Early days: Print media

Given public interest in children’s relations to media, it is not surprising to find that these relations were intermittent objects of study before media studies developed into a demarcated academic field. Perhaps one of the earliest example of this interest is a study conducted by British journalist Edward G. Salmon in 1888. He surveyed the reading habits of children aged 11–19, and his results demonstrate an overwhelming popularity in inexpensive periodicals, penny-part adventures, and serialized romance (Salmon 1888). Salmon is appalled by the young readers’ poor tastes and puts particular blame on middle-class parents for failing their responsibility as role models. The study is a precursor to approaches that are later professionalized within the effects tradition. It demonstrates how earlier studies of children’s relation to media are deeply implicated with issues pertinent to public debate. But it equally reveals that, from very early on, investigations assumed credibility through quantification.

Since the late nineteenth century, librarians and literary scholars made intermittent examinations of children’s literature by focusing on issues of representation and were guided by normative assumptions about taste and appropriate cultural fare for the young (Hunt 1991). Based on textual analyses, inferences are made about what is good for children and what measures should be applied to advance young readers’ literacies. Although the literary legacy is rarely acknowledged, with its explicit interpretive approach, this strand of study is a preamble of a culturalist paradigm from the 1970s and onward.

3 Establishing mainstream research on children and media

Studying children’s relation to media became institutionalized with the development of media studies after World War I in the United States, Great Britain and parts
of continental Europe. The main research approach developed as part of the social sciences, and it becomes known as the effects tradition (Lowery and DeFleur 1995). The effects tradition is based on two basic assumptions:

1. Media are conduits transporting content from sender to receiver. The process of transmission can be studied with a focus on its discrete elements

2. Children are perceptually and cognitively more malleable than adults and hence more vulnerable to what media have to offer. Their relations to media can be studied with a focus on the measurable psychological impact of media on the individual child.

The view on media must be understood within the social framework of its development. After World War I, issues of direct effect in the form of propaganda influencing public opinion were very much on people’s minds. At the same time, media reached an increasing part of the population, particularly in industrialized and increasingly urbanized environments. Media became wide ranging cultural artefacts. With the huge popularity of film, they also became publicly visible. For example, in Great Britain and the United States, school-age children and adolescents made up 30% of cinema audiences in the 1920s (Richards 1984).

The media environment also impact researchers’ views on children. Film is an audio-visual medium, which spectators can decode in its most immediate form without formal training to decipher its codes. On the other hand and for the overall majority, the ability to read print media, needs some sort of introduction to its codes and conventions. Therefore, film (and later radio) immediately lends itself to an understanding of the young audience as malleable and under direct influence.

Early studies on film uncover both positive and negative effects on children. For example, in Great Britain, the first film inquiry was set up in 1917 by the National Council of Public Morals. The study applies experimental models and quantitative data to determine the impact of film with particular reference to their learning outcomes. The Council’s 1925 report, *The Cinema in Education*, did not validate public accusations leveled against film for its ill effects (Marchant 1925). In fact, it put the blame for juvenile delinquency on social conditions (Richards 1984).

In the United States, the Motion Picture Research Council in 1928 commissioned a series of studies to be financed by the philanthropic Payne Study and Experiment Fund. The studies, known as the Payne Fund studies, focus on a range of potential impacts on children’s retention of information and also on their emotional states, attitudes, and specific behaviours, including sleep patterns. Researchers apply mostly quantitative survey methods, such as content analysis of themes; but some researchers also include experimental designs, case studies, and in-depth interviews. The resulting 12 volumes was published in 1933 and 1934 under the umbrella title *Motion Pictures and Youth* and with a summary by Werrett W. Charters (1933) and are among the most detailed investigations of movie-going. The main findings corroborate the findings of their British colleagues. Correlations of impact are found for particular
groups of children and particular genres, but researchers caution against simple causal effects and are at pains to include contextual factors in their analyses. In addition, the studies show that films are important to children, not so much because they directly emulate their content, but because films create interpretive frameworks for understanding their personal problems and aspirations.

These pioneering studies are important scientific signposts for later research. They lay out research designs that are still followed today by mainstream scholarship. Research questions are concerned with the psychological impact of media in terms of individual children’s behaviour, attitudes and health, and children’s are defined according to ages and stages. The methodologies applied are mostly quantitative in the form of content analysis of particular media genres and surveys of children’s responses. The early studies are also important because they pave the way for granular analyses offering useful documentation, which can help amend the often binary claims found in public discourse. Finally, the early studies identify key issues in the relationship between children and media that are still relevant today and continue to occupy scholars: How do media affect children’s behaviour, for example in relation to violence and aggression? How do media affect children’s attitudes, for example to sex, gender, ethnicity and class? How do media affect children’s physical and mental health, for example in terms of body image, obesity, anxiety and attention? In the following, we shall examine how two of these questions are studied, namely media impact on aggression and violence and media impact on attitudes to gender. These types of study are selected because they also illuminate important theoretical traditions in the research on children and media.

4 Studying media violence and aggression

Studies of the relations between violent or aggressive media content and children’s violent or aggressive behaviour are based on social learning theory, which later expanded into social cognitive theory. It was first developed by Albert Bandura and his colleagues in the 1960s through experiments with children watching violent scenes from television programmes (Bandura 1977). The theory hypothesizes that children will imitate violent television content in real life because they emulate characters they can relate to in a positive way and behaviour that is rewarded. In this way, children come to adopt cognitive scripts that legitimate violence as appropriate behaviour in real-life situations. Empirical studies demonstrate that correlations exist between violent television content and violent behaviour, but the correlations are dependent on factors related to the perspective on violence (hero or villain, degree of realism) and to the viewer (age, personality, cognitive abilities) (Paik and Comstock 1994; Potter, 1999). While results are inconclusive in validating direct and long-term effects that are independent of contextual factors, this line of research continues to
be influential, especially in the United States and parts of Asia. For example, the latter is evidenced by many articles in *Asian Journal of Communication* (1990–); and it now also includes studies on computer game violence (Anderson et al. 2010).

5 Studying long-term socialization effects of media use

It is an often-repeated fact that children in the global North when they reach adulthood have spent more time with media than at school. Naturally, this situation raises questions about how media affect children’s wider views on others and on the world around them. Cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross to address such long-term socialization effects. Borne out of social learning theory and the recurrent criticisms leveled against it to examine de-contextualized programme items, cultivation theory focuses on the cumulative effects of television on audiences’ perceptions and attitudes (Gerbner et al. 1978). Gerbner and his colleagues argue that television reaches virtually everyone, has very low barriers of decoding content, and feeds on generic and easy-to recognize narratives – all of which lead to a mainstreaming of viewers’ world-views (Gerbner et al. 1980). Cultivation theorists claim that this mainstreaming is particularly critical for children because children are in a process of learning about the world that differs markedly from adults and have less cognitive capacity than adults to imagine alternatives to what is immediately present (Gerbner et al. 1994).

Studies on attitudes to gender roles are among the many investigations on the long-term media effects on children’s socialization. Studies find that the time spent with media is correlated to the degree of gender stereotyping in young audiences. For example, so-called “heavy” television viewers hold the most stereotypical attitudes to gender roles (Signorelli 2001). This finding is in line with the general assumptions underlying cultivation theory. Like their social learning colleagues, cultivation researchers are concerned with what they term media “exposure” and “screen time.” They also correlate the amount of media use to degree of impact: The more audiences watch, the more they are influenced. Unsurprisingly, this type of reasoning also underpins empirical investigations of how gender roles are portrayed in media content for children, particularly television. A key study on 20 years of cartoons aimed at children in the United States showed that boy characters are more likely than girl characters to be inventive, outgoing and problem-solving, while girl characters are more likely than boy characters to be attentive to relations and in need of assistance. Still, the authors also point to a trend towards gender polarization with a co-existence of very feminine/masculine characters and characters opposing these binaries (Thompson and Zerbinos 1995). In a more recent comparative study on children’s television programmes across 24 countries, Götz and Lemish (2012) largely confirm these findings. They find that male characters are more likely than female characters to be
independent protagonists or antagonists, while female characters are more likely than male characters to be part of a group and conform to Barbie-like body images (Göttz and Lemish, 2012).

Whether we analyze social learning theory, with its focus on short-term and direct effects of particular programmes, or cultivation theory, with its attention to long-term and more indirect or cumulative effects of media fare, no simple conclusions can be drawn on the effects resulting from children's relationship with media. A number of key questions are bundled together, making it virtually impossible to generalise from the vast number of studies at hand. Are effects determined in terms of causality or correlation? Are effects direct or indirect – are they short-term or long-term? Are effects seen in experimental surroundings or in natural settings? Do research designs prime findings of either prosocial or antisocial behaviour? If ‘television’ replaces ‘media environment’, Schramm, Lyle and Parker’s conditional assertions about effects still seem valid:

For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial (Schramm, Lyle, and Parker 1961: 11).

6 Critique of effects research

As noted, the effects tradition is the mainstream paradigm in studying the relationship between children and media, and “shorter term consequences of media use dominate the literature” (Wartella et al. 2016: 13). Such a dominance will inevitably have its opponents. Among the recurrent criticisms (see McGuire 1986; Cumberbatch 1989) are the following:

- Definition of media: Media are seen as a neutral windows on the world, a view that obscures that media are signifying technologies of communication articulating, and not just transmitting and reflecting views on the world. Thus, claims cannot be validated that more truthful or diverse representations should reflect real-world conditions; or, conversely, that too narrow content repertoires are imprinted into children’s perceptions and views on the world.

- Selection of media: The continued focus on television obscures the multi-media environment that children have always occupied, and certainly engage with today. This selective focus lends itself to over-interpretation and cannot be applied as a basis of generalization to other media.

- Definition of children: A focus on “the child” in universalising terms serves to underestimate differences among children and to deny historical transformations of childhood.

- Theories about children: An individualist, cognitivist and developmental understanding of children brackets out explanations that cannot be referred back to differences in terms of age and developmental stages.
Methodological choices: The preponderance of quantitative surveys and experiments lends itself to analyses where disaggregate entities are uncoupled from their actual contexts of use, thus lowering internal and external validity.

Researcher position: The media environment in United States and normative assumptions there about childhood are naturalised as a basis of universalising claims that do not hold up to empirical scrutiny. For example, radio, not television, has been the most widely adopted medium in parts of Latin America and Africa until very recently; and on a global scale childhood plays out very differently with labour as a defining feature in many countries.

Some media researchers, while skeptical about actual methodologies and research designs in effects research, acknowledge that the question of media effects is at the core of media studies at large:

While it has proved difficult to demonstrate that the media does affect our interpretative frameworks, it is also difficult to construct an argument about the origins of these frameworks which does not involve the media, for the media have permeated most if not all aspects of everyday life (Livingstone 1996: 324).

Livingstone calls for studies of what she terms “the enculturating role of the media” by which she means “processes, which work over long time periods, and which are integral to rather than separable from other forms of social determination, [and] would ask not how the media make us act or think, but rather how the media contribute to making us who we are” (Livingstone 1996: 324).

7 The culturalist paradigm

A culturalist paradigm in studying children’s relation to media is established from the 1970s on as part of wider transformations in sociological and cultural research in parts of Europe, Latin America and the United States, transformations that also impact media studies. Generally speaking, these transformations are often politically motivated, and they set in motion critiques leveled against what is considered to be positivist paradigms of scholarship.

In media studies, culturalist researchers oppose the effects tradition which is regarded as a form of what Paul Lazarsfeld in 1941 labeled “administrative research” and defined as complementary to “critical research” (Lazarsfeld 1941). The culturalist paradigm adheres to the strand of critical research, and most researchers are explicit about their normative research interests in unmasking power regimes and in catalysing the expression of what they see as repressed voices. In studies of childhood, the culturalist paradigm is resonant with what becomes known as the new sociology of childhood (Qvortrup 1994; Corsaro 1997; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998).
opposes existing studies of childhood marked by historical studies (Aries [1960] 1973) and social-psychological and cognitivist approaches focusing on individual development, such as we have seen it demonstrated in the effects tradition. Instead, children are defined as actors in their own lives which are studied as webs of situated practices formed around family, peers and everyday areas such school, possibly work, and leisure. Still, the new sociology of childhood pays very little attention to the ways in which media play into children’s arenas of practice and everyday routines.

From these historical junctures, culturalist research on children’s relations to media is premised on two basic assumptions:
1. Media are signifying technologies of communication. Signs such as text, live and still images, and sound are the building blocks of media articulations produced and circulating in particular institutional contexts of power.
2. Children are active agents in the formation of their everyday lives. This agency extends to media which they appropriate as sense-making tools across a range of contexts.

These assumptions have clear implications for the theories adopted and for the research designs and methodologies applied. Micro-sociological strands and theories of everyday life underpin many studies (de Certeau 1988; Goffmann 1959; Lefebvre [1946] 1990; Geertz 1973). They also form intellectual backdrops to less media-centric approaches (Drotner 1993; Couldry 2009), and to a development of concepts such as domestication with Roger Silverstone as a key proponent (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Hartmann 2006). In terms of research designs, the culturalist assumptions about media and about children imply a focus on holistic research designs, that is designs that focus on naturalistic settings and allow the relationship between children and media to be examined through a combination of semiotic and social dimensions of analysis. As for methodologies, qualitative approaches gain ground in the form of, for example, critical discourse analysis, participant observation, individual and focus-group interviews.

Seen in relation to the effects paradigm, the culturalist paradigm implies a shift in researchers’ focus towards:
- Processes: Studying audiences’ meaning-making involves semiotic analyses that focus on how media construct affordances of interpretation, and how children turn these affordances into meaning-making practices. Media content cannot be reduced to what messages media convey.
- People: Studying media environments involves holistic research designs which illuminate group interactions, and their varieties, in naturalistic settings rather than individual impact.
- Practices: Studying mediated meaning-making environments involves processual methodologies whereby researchers may uncover why children appropriate media the way they do. This is because processual methodologies allow researchers to follow children’s interpretive flows and juctures, mapping complex, real-world conditions underlying immediate situations of use.
8 Culturalist studies: Issues of power, distinction and identity

A pioneering study, which is instrumental in shaping the culturalist paradigm, is Bob Hodge and David Tripp’s *Children and television: A semiotic approach* (Hodge and Tripp 1986). They examine Australian children’s interpretation of cartoons through a combination of semiotic and Piagetian analysis. Their findings document how children apply granular, and often subtle, interpretive repertoires of exploration and critique and how their interpretations feed into wider cultures of play (Hodge and Tripp, 1986). The authors also illuminate how children’s talk when interviewed operate as a form of identity work, a methodological aspect that has since been taken up and developed by a number of researchers (e.g. Buckingham 1993).

As is already evident in Hodge and Tripp’s influential investigation, few empirical studies of children and media within the broadly defined culturalist paradigm adhere to all dimensions of the paradigm as laid out above. Until very recently, most studies have focused on domestic environments (Jordan 1992; Facer et al. 2003), on single media or genres (Buckingham 1996; Kirkland 2017), and on either analytical dimensions of social practice (Ito et al. 2010) or on dimensions of semiotic interpretation (Wojik-Andrews, Ian. 2000, Nikolajeva 2017). Only a few studies encompass aspects of production in addition to the more prevalent aspects of texts and audiences (Wasko, Phillips, and Meehan 2001; Drotner 2003, 2004; Tobin 2004).

Children’s widespread uptake of digital, portable and networked media for communication over the past two decades have spurred professional reorientations within the culturalist paradigm. The way in which mobile devices display a convergence of representational modes, media genres and communicative functions and uses make mobiles perhaps the clearest example of the range in contributions. These include youthful use of mobiles for play, for gendered fashion-management, and for parental and commercial surveillance to note just a few themes (Katz and Sugiyama 2005; Christensen 2009; Hjort and Richardson 2014).

As digital communication matures and the novelty of gadgets fades into everyday routines, it is evident that academic questions asked about children’s relations to digital media continue along familiar faultlines of interest but with important new aspects to be addressed. Questions of power remain key to the culturalist paradigm, also in the complex and connected digital environment that children occupy today. Power relations continue to be examined both in terms of parent-child relations, differentials in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and geographical location. But the digital environment also catalyse new aspects to be addressed. These include children’s dependence on highly popular data-driven social media platforms such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft, whose infrastructures and business models are beyond the insight and control of users.
Questions of social and cultural distinction also remain relevant in studying children’s relation to media. Following Pierre Bourdieu ([1979] 1989), culturalist researchers have documented how children’s media appropriations are important in cultural stratification processes where knowledge garnered about everything from toys to teen idols operate as forms of cultural capital in juvenile culture. Children’s involvement with media culture does not merely generate a common ground of generational culture, it also operates in multiple ways to position the young within repertoires of taste. From the 1980s on, research findings documenting how children juggle taste repertoires are discussed in terms of style and within discursive binaries of high and low culture (Willis 1990). The digital environment continues these processes of distinction, but it equally transforms their implications. This is because some children’s cultural capital, which they mostly acquire through out-of-school peer-networks, can be exchanged for material capital in an economy where certain media and information literacies are in high demand. As discourses of twenty-first century skills are selectively put into educational and occupational practice, some juveniles’ leisured media skills become hard currency while others become devalued (Drotner 2008). Cultural distinctions of taste thus transform into occupational inequalities and the formation of what Ursula Huws terms a “cybertar-iat” (Huws 2003).

Questions of identity have perhaps been the most recurrent theme in culturalist research on the imbrications between children and the media. This is not least because the theoretical focus on micro-processes of interpretation and interaction easily materialises into granular, empirical examinations of how children’s media engagements are interlaced with their being and becoming in the world. As already evident in Hodge and Tripp’s work, analyses focus as much on how media play into the ways children’s identities are shaped, performed and shared as on which types of juvenile identity can be detected. Again, the digital environment at once maintains and transforms the research questions asked about children’s mediated identity work. Aspects to do with children’s creative formation of identity through media production come to the fore in tandem with a lowering of the barriers for many children to express themselves through digital production tools. Young YouTubers, teen sexting and online zines are widely different examples of children’s voice, of children’s performance of identity work through digital modes of production. These diversities testify to a situation in which media scholarship needs to differentiate concepts of identity in order to fully capture such processes and their wider implications.

How questions of power, distinction and identity play out in children’s digital environments is vividly illuminated in The class (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). The authors follow a specific class of 13-year-olds in a socially mixed area of London, Great Britain, for a year in and out of school. Using interviews and participant observation across the students’ everyday settings in addition to surveying their media practices and mapping their online and offline networks, the authors chart how their
informants navigate structural dilemmas facing children today through networks of connection and disconnection made across family, school and leisure. Some of these networks are facilitated by media, some not. Careful documentation of the ways in which media practices are enmeshed with, and centrally shaped by, socio-economic status, cultural capital, ethnicity and gender serves as a sobering alternative to claims of celebration and concern in public discourses about the implications of digitization for children in the twenty-first century.

9 Critique of culturalism

It is precisely in defining what these wider implications are that much critique of the culturalist research paradigm sets in. As we noted above, the paradigm is borne out of a view on children as active agents and media as meaning-making resources. So, an attention to children’s voice and to their opportunities of expression is at the core of many academics’ research interests. Critics claim that such interests easily slide into a conflation of activity, agency and power. According to David Buckingham:

There is a risk of adopting a rather simplistic ‘child-centred’ approach, which seeks to celebrate the sophistication of the ‘media-wise’ child, and to prove (endlessly) that children are not as gullible or as passive as they are made out to be. There is often an implicit assumption that if children are ‘active’, then they are somehow not going to be influenced by what they watch. Yet this does not necessarily follow: indeed, one could argue that in some instances to be ‘active’ is to be more open to influence – and ‘activity’ should not in itself be equated with agency, or with social power (Buckingham 2008: 227).

Related to the criticism of voice are arguments that culturalist researchers fail to address structural limitations in their focus on children’s everyday processes of interpretation and negotiation. This type of criticism resonates with well-known binaries in media studies between a political communications tradition and more explicit interpretive approaches (Corner 1991). The critique has gained new impetus with digitization of mediated communication. As indicated above, children are affected by corporate platform architectures and algorithmic values in what José van Dijck calls “the platform society” (van Dijck 2016).

10 Transformations of the research field

The effects paradigm and the culturalist paradigm outlined above in many ways ask complementary questions, and so their combined answers would seem to offer a full picture of children’s relationship with media. Yet, this full picture has not
emerged, and it is not likely to emerge in the near future. This is because the two paradigms in fundamental ways diverge in terms of their research interests and their epistemological foundations; so it is not merely a question of tweaking methodological approaches and empirical focal points in order to reach a more unified approach.

Despite these fundamental differences, the two paradigms share scientific trajectories in the field which are important to hold on to because they may offer future points of joint advancement. First, it is important to acknowledge that “children and media” now exists as a demarcated sub-field within the wider academic community of media studies. It has its own divisions and interest groups in international societies such as the International Communication Association, the International Association of Media and Communication Research, and European Communication Research and Education Association. Important to this institutionalization has been the establishment in 1997 of a resource centre of global reach called the International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media. It is a storehouse for information on research, policies and practices related to the sub-field, engaging in projects and conferences as well as publication of reports and themed yearbooks. Since 2007, the sub-field also has a scientific publication venue, Journal of Children and Media, which is one of the key points of scholarly dialogue across the effects and the culturalist paradigms.

Importantly, the past decade has seen a significant number of joint national and international research projects. The most comprehensive is the EU Kids Online, originally conceived and directed by Sonia Livingstone and now expanding into a global research network (EU Kids n.d.). This development indicates that researchers seriously begin to undermine the hegemony of the global North which has characterized the development of the sub-field charted in this chapter. In addition to institution-building within the field of media studies, children and media draw increasing interest from other fields such as anthropology, education, cultural geography and parts of the medical sciences. Still, interest and impact does not equal theoretical and empirical integration across these main fields.

While the relationship between children and media is of interest to media studies from the outset, and while many questions asked about this relationship remain the same over the years, the subfield has moved from the margins to the centre of both academic research, practice and policy-work over the past three decades. This is not least because digital information and communication technologies, and the commodified data streams underlying them, have become fundamental infrastructures that in many ways transform how societies, institutions and everyday routines are organized, connected and disconnected. This transformation means that children’s relationship with media are no longer relegated to the home or leisured peer practices here and now. Rather, the relationship is at the core of what children can do in future, who they can, and cannot, become – and hence what forms societies may take. This transformation, in turn, adds to adult responsibilities to help frame the routes to be taken and the ones to be avoided.
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