

Children's Media Lives: Year 1 Findings - Devices and Activities

Aims

Ofcom's Children's Media Lives study was set up in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. It is a three-year study, tracking, as far as possible, the same 18 children, aged 8-15 in wave 1. The first of three waves of ethnographic research was conducted in autumn 2014. Subsequent waves will be conducted in 2015 and 2016. The study provides an in-depth understanding of how this illustrative sample of children are thinking about and using digital media, and how this differs and is influenced by age, life-stage, family circumstances, peers and wider society. It will explore how digital media use evolves over time as children develop, and in response to external changes, such as new schools, friendships and access to new technology.

Key Findings

Devices

- **Apps and portable devices meant parents and children were not always sure when children were online.** Going online now happens on a range of devices, including tablets, phones and games consoles, and often through apps and games rather than via a browser. It is often seamlessly integrated into the functionality of the game, app or service. This meant that both children and parents were sometimes unclear about when the child was online and how much time they spent using the internet.
- **Many of the children shared access to devices with siblings or parents.** Sharing could be between siblings, between a parent or parents and one or more children, or between all family members. This was most common for younger children, who often shared access to mobile phones or tablets with parents and/or siblings.
- **Tablets and the iPod Touch were children's access point of choice for most activities.** They appealed to the children for a number of reasons. They were a convenient size, easy to use, and portable so children could use them in different locations in the house. For some of the older children smartphones also played this role.
- **Lots of the children had 'hand-me-down' technology.** The children were often given old devices when parents upgraded. They were using parents' old smartphones and were given access to unwanted laptops or desktops as parents switched to faster models. Some families also had a range of second-hand devices.

Activities

- **The boundaries between social media and gaming were blurred.** The children were using the chat functionality provided by online games to talk both with friends and with people they didn't know. Also, many of the younger girls were engaged in 'social gaming', like Animal Jam or Farmville, in

which the purpose of the game was socialising and interacting with others. It had therefore become increasingly difficult for the children to disentangle where the 'gaming' element ended and the 'social media' element began, as the two were often seamlessly integrated.

- **YouTube was the go-to place for video and search.** Internet browsers and search engines were used for school work, researching purchases and comparing prices, but YouTube was the primary source for other kinds of information. YouTube was also frequently used for distraction or amusement, with children moving from one video to the next using the recommended or suggested videos displayed by the site or searching for new videos themselves.
- **On-demand and YouTube video clips were the preferred means of accessing audio-visual content.** YouTube vloggers (online video diaries) were particularly popular, watched on a weekly, and in some cases daily, basis. Being able to watch their preferred content, often repeatedly, at the time of their choosing was important to the children and they were quick to turn to other devices and services when they did not find live TV engaging.
- **The TV set played an important role in family viewing.** This was a valued way for the children to spend time with their parents. This was often live, 'occasion' viewing, but could also be via catch-up or DVD for favourite programmes and films.

Policy Context

The Children's Media Lives research project enhances the substantive body of quantitative research Ofcom conducts into the trends in the media usage patterns of children and young people. This research helps policy makers understand how children are using and engaging with media and to identify which elements of media literacy to develop and promote.

Methodology

Researchers spent three to four hours with each child and young person, in their home, interviewing and developing an understanding of their behaviours, attitudes and understanding in relation to digital media. The interviews on which this analysis is based were informed by a topic guide, but the researchers allowed the child to determine the general flow of the conversations. Stimulus material was used to prompt discussion in areas of the topic guide that were less top-of-mind for children, such as the role of online advertising. The ethnographic interviews were supplemented with short interviews with parents and siblings, to better understand the household dynamics and access to digital media.

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