Children at Play?

Essay Review of *Kids and Media in America* by D. Roberts and U. Foehr

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**Media Psychologists Struggle to Convince Public that the Emperor is Unclothed**

In Hans Christian Andersen’s tale *The Emperor’s New Suit* [Andersen, 1837], two swindlers successfully dupe an entire city into acting as though their naked ruler were, in fact, clothed. Not until an innocent child speaks the truth, and his father encourages the people to listen to the child, is the truth publicly accepted. This parable represents aptly the struggle of today’s media researcher.

In an interview with CNN, I explained that scientists, such as myself, had gathered strong evidence suggesting that exposure to violent video games increases aggression in the player [e.g., Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bushman & Anderson, 2001]. My interview was followed by a response from video game industry executive Doug Lowenstein stating, ‘There is absolutely no evidence, none, that playing a violent video game leads to aggressive behavior’ [Time Warner, 2000].

Recently, in the *American Psychologist*, top media researchers Bushman and Anderson [2001] explained how the media commonly misrepresent scientific research on media violence. Even top news magazines are directly contradicting the current scientific understanding that exposure to violent media causes aggression, going so far as to attack high-quality scientific research by noted scholars Huesmann and Eron [Huesman, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003]. Some likely causes for this erroneous reporting include influence of industry with a vested interest in making profits from media and a public who is motivated to avoid facing up to the idea that their media diet is unhealthy [Bartholow, Dill, Anderson, & Lindsay, 2003; FTC, 2000; ‘Poll says games are safe,’ 1999]. Cognitive dissonance theory would predict that if we are spending too much time with media, and allowing our children to do the same, then we would be unreceptive to anyone, even scien-

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tists, telling us that our habits are harmful. To return to the analogy of the Emperor’s New Suit, the public is influenced by the merchants; in this case, the media industry whose large profits are at stake. While in the fable, the child (and then the parent) sees the truth, this is often not the case when it comes to understanding that exposure to harmful media content, and overexposure in general, is unhealthy. So, it is the scientists who struggle to get the public – parents and children alike – to hear the truth, ignore the merchants and acknowledge their own insecurities and motivations. The scientists’ hope, then, is to see Andersen’s resolution realized – that the public would hear the truth as such and act on it.

**Kids and Media in America Uniquely Reports American Media Habits**

When I was a child in the 1970’s, I never could have imagined the video games, internet sites, or the myriad other media choices available to my children today. In my mind, there is a map of the streets of the suburban neighborhood where I grew up, because I spent a lot of time there riding my bike, climbing trees, jumping fences, and walking to friends’ houses to play. Unfortunately, there is a dramatic difference between the childhood activities of today’s parents and those of their children. Donald Roberts and Ulla Foehr describe current patterns of children’s media use in their book *Kids and Media in America* [2004]. Given the sheer amount of current childhood media use reported by Roberts and Foehr, it is clear that this source of learning and socialization significantly affects the modern experience of childhood. What used to be considered play time is now almost exclusively media time. Not only is this a cause for concern because of the (often negative) effects associated with the content of our media (e.g., aggression, eating disorders, poor school performance), but also it is a real loss of the activities that this astounding amount of media use displaces, such as physical activity and the time our children devote to using their imaginations.

*Kids and Media in America* is an in-depth report about how American children spend their free time. As such it is, in part, a historical document about our culture, describing the media-saturated climate in which our children grow and develop. In the end, we learn that American children (2–18 years of age) are exposed to about 6.5 hours of media per day (not including the time that media is used for school assignments), and that they are immersed in multiple forms of media. Kids commonly have ‘personal media’, that is radios, CD players, TVs and video game consoles, in their bedrooms. Much of the time, children use media alone or with other children, and the authors lament, ‘what looks to us to be a kind of parental abdication of oversight over children’s media behavior’ (p. 202).

The authors employ a level of analysis of media use that is deeper than appears elsewhere, asking such questions as these: What are the attitudes in the home about media use? Are there rules for use? Is the TV on even when no one is watching? In what social context does use take place? Do specific kinds of media use correlate with demographic variables? Can we identify profiles or types of media users?

And without doubt, our kids are ‘media users.’ The sheer numbers reported here should convince anyone who cares about children that the role of media in children’s development demands attention. The authors conclude that on any given
day in America, less than 5% of children report using media for an hour or less – everyone else is a heavier user. This is despite the fact that kids explain that a substantial proportion of their media use amounts to just ‘killing time,’ and that for almost all forms of media studied, increased media exposure predicts decreased contentment and social adjustment.

Nature of the Book

*Kids and Media in America* is largely a descriptive report. As such it does not delve deeply into the content of the media or media effects. Also, a large portion of the book reads very much like an expanded Results and Discussion section of a journal article. There are ten chapters. Chapter 2 is a description of the research methods employed. Chapters 4–7 focus on statistics related to media use, organized by genre (e.g., screen, audio, print, interactive), and Chapters 3, 8, and 9 are summaries of various results. And these results chapters are, in fact, dense with statistics, so much so that even those with research training may find them quite involved and somewhat difficult to digest. This is due in part to the fact that analyses are broken down by multiple age groups and other demographic variables. There are, however, short summaries dispersed throughout these readings, and each chapter ends with a broader summary. Chapter 1, the introduction, and Chapter 10, conclusion, are less dense and more broad and narrative than the other chapters.

Audience. Because of the nature of the sample, and the depth of detail reported, *Kids and Media in America* is first and foremost a ‘must have’ reference for media researchers. I’m confident that professionals will welcome this type of extensive dataset, and widely cite the statistics presented. Professionals will also profit from using some of the operational definitions employed, and from following up on topics for future research suggested by the book. Beyond that, it would work as a college or graduate school text book, or as a reference book suitable for any university library. I do not see this as a book that a concerned parent or schoolteacher could easily digest or use. Rather, like many journal articles, it would be better translated by professionals and disseminated to the public.

Next, I will give a brief summary and commentary on the research methods employed by the authors. Then, in the remaining sections of this essay review, I will select and comment upon some of the results that I found most intriguing, expanding the discussion to include a broader analysis of topics that are most meaningful, new, or relevant for interested readers.

Method. In the book description on the back cover, *Kids and Media in America* places itself in context, saying that it ‘reports the only national random sample survey of U.S. children’s and adolescents’ use of all the various media available to them conducted in at least the past thirty years,’ and that it provides the ‘first study to examine young people’s overall media budgets and the first to attempt to describe distinctly different types of young media users.’ As an expert, I believe these claims are substantiated. So, it’s the nature of the sample and the types of detailed questions asked that make the book unique.

The authors rightly suggest that sampling media use is not as simple as it may seem. How accurate are kids’ memories for media use? Do they have a good idea of how much time they devote to media? The authors decided to use a general for-
where they ask children how long they used a particular form of media yesterday because they argued it would be more accurate than other estimates, like weekly or ‘usually’. They also divided respondents into a younger (2–7 years) and older (8–18 years) group. These groups are distinctly different because, for the younger sample, they used parent responses from in-home questionnaires, while for the older sample, they surveyed the children themselves in the schools. Though the parent responses make sense (how can one interview a two-year-old accurately about his media use?), it clearly brings up issues such as social desirability and accuracy, which the authors discuss as problematic and, in fact, sometimes suggest that the older sample be taken as the more accurate for these reasons.

Particularly Provocative Data

As mentioned above, Kids and Media in America contains a very large number of statistics, and they are sometimes difficult to sift through. It may be helpful for the reader, then, if I draw out and elaborate on what I consider some of the most important, meaningful, or provocative research results reported in the book.

Race

Roberts and Foehr report consistent distinctions in how children of different races use media. For example, African-American children are heavier users of TV and video games, and are more likely to have bedroom TVs, premium TV stations, and multiple media units (e.g., TVs) in the home. African-American children are also more likely to live in ‘constant TV’ homes – homes where the TV is usually on even if no one is watching. They are also more likely than Whites or Hispanics to live in a home where the TV is typically on during meals. Whites are more likely to have computers and internet access and to use print and music media. Hispanics often fall in the middle, between Whites and Blacks, on these statistics. One interesting finding is that, though Whites are more likely to own computers, Hispanics who own computers use them more than Black and White children who own computers.

Roberts and Foehr present a very interesting analysis of Black media use. They suggest that African-American households are quite TV-oriented across the board. Even more broadly, they suggest that African-Americans are more drawn to ‘fantasy’ (e.g., TV with premium cable stations, video game consoles) than to ‘reality’ (e.g., internet, print) media.

Socioeconomic Status

Similarly, those homes with less wealthy parents show greater ownership of video game consoles as well as subscriptions to premium cable channels. Computer ownership and internet access are positively correlated with parent education. Again, attraction to ‘reality content’ is positively correlated with socioeconomic status, while attraction to ‘fantasy content’ is negatively correlated with socioeconomic status.
Fantasy and Reality

This distinction suggests that having a lower social status may lead children to use media as a form of escapism. Perhaps this escapism includes an attraction to fantasies of power and dominance. If true, this would surely inform the media violence literature. In general, the analysis of factors which correlate with preference for reality versus fantasy media speaks to a topic that is not discussed often or deeply enough in the media effects literature, namely what motivates media use. Surely the motivation predicts both the choice of media content and the effects that content has on the user (for instance, how it is processed and perceived, what meanings are attributed to the content). This is a difficult and detailed task to set before researchers, but if done, will certainly result in clarifying past research as well as giving new life to future research. One might pre-select research participants on fantasy versus reality media orientation, for example, and predict differential effects of media on these two groups of users. One might also ask more detailed questions about how participants perceived the media messages they received. Surprisingly little research has focused on the role of individual differences in responses to media exposure (some exceptions include Anderson and Dill [2000] and Bushman [1996]). Yet, I am arguing that discovering how these types of individual differences play a role in shaping media-related thoughts, behaviors and feelings will, in fact, help researchers better elaborate and understand the more global theoretical models that form the basis of media research.

Media Types. In Chapter 9, Roberts and Foehr describe a fresh approach to individual differences in media use. They employ a cluster analysis to group children into six different types of users, each representing roughly 15–19% of users. The media types are VidKid, Media Lite, Interactor, Restricted, Enthusiast and Indifferent. A figure shows how these types relate to media access and time spent using media. The authors argue that these categories might help us predict how kids respond to and choose media. Again, these new categories can contribute in an important way to the methodology and theory of future media research.

Sheer Amount of Media Use. According to this research, TV is, by far, the most often used form of media across age and other demographic variables. The sole exception is that in the later teen years, music use dominates. For 15- to 18-year-olds, music is the most often used form of media, with hip hop/rap and alternative rock being the clearly preferred genres. The authors make the interesting comment that music is largely produced for and performed by young people and thus is a very personal and meaningful genre for teens.

For 8- to 18-year-olds, total daily media exposure time (including times multiple forms of media are used at once) is between 7 and 8 hours per day. The authors relate media use to free time saying that most of the free time our kids have is devoted to media. The daily ‘media budget’ of American kids is divided between TV and movies, music, video games, computers and print media. A typical child uses most of these forms of media daily, for differing amounts of time. For example, while daily TV time is measured in hours, daily print exposure is measured in minutes.

Bedroom Media. Two thirds of 8- to 18-year-olds have their own televisions, and half of these have their own VCRs. Among 11- to 14-year-olds, generally the heaviest media users, 70% have bedroom TVs, about 50% have bedroom video game consoles, over 90% have their own tape/CD players, and about 20% have
bedroom computers. African-American children are especially likely to have their own TVs and related media. The authors wisely point out that, ‘where once the words “go to your room” implied the punishment of isolation, for many children today it is little more than a directive to visit a media arcade’ (p. 42).

**Simultaneous Use.** American kids commonly use two or more forms of media at the same time. For example, they read e-mail while watching TV. The authors quote a child as saying that each form of media has a lag time that gets boring, so it is necessary to have multiple sources of media on at once. The authors measure and comment on simultaneous use throughout the book, something that has rarely been done previously in this fashion. From a media effects perspective, one important direction for future research would be to elaborate on the effects of this simultaneous exposure on variables like attention, mood, and cognitive abilities.

**A Paradox?**

The authors make the interesting point that, ‘...although U.S. youth spend a great deal of time with television, they do not find it to be particularly stimulating’ (p. 83). Over two thirds of older kids admit that they often watch TV just to ‘kill time.’ Even though there appears to be a lack of satisfaction engendered by TV watching, it is clearly a pervasive habit. Among 8- to 18-year-olds, daily viewing time (including home videos) ranges between about 3 and roughly 4.5 hours. Also, about half of these children report living in constant TV homes, and only 16% respond that the TV is ‘seldom’ or ‘never’ used in this fashion in their home. Also, among 8- to 18-year-olds, about two thirds say the TV is usually on during meals. Of kids living in constant TV homes, more than half also report having no rules for TV use. And interestingly, less contented youth spend more time with media in general than do more contented youth.

So, if TV is not particularly stimulating, and is often used just to kill time, why is it the most common form of free-time activity for our kids? Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi [2002] report that 70% of children watch more TV than they want to watch and that heavy viewers actually enjoy watching TV less than light viewers. Their explanation is, first, that TV activates our orienting response, catching our attention at an almost primal level and then making us vulnerable to suggestion (e.g., advertisements). Further, TV viewing begins with a relaxation response, but often viewing goes on for longer than is comfortable for the viewer and ends up producing a negative emotional response. Roberts and Foehr comment that when one lives in a constant TV home, it’s hard not to be drawn into more TV watching than one desires. TV producers know how to draw an audience, even against our better judgment.

**Current Scientific Understanding about Media Effects**

Taken together, this information suggests that our children are victims to a process they don’t fully understand. A large literature suggests negative effects of exposure to media, ranging from decreased vocabulary to increased aggression. In the case of media violence, over 40 years of research has produced consistent find-
ings that media violence exposure increases aggression, both in the long and the short term, and for both males and females [see, for example, Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Huesmann et al., 2003]. In a joint statement to Congress, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the American Medical Association stated that the accumulated scientific evidence ‘point[s] overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children’ [Joint Statement, 2000, p. 1]. Also of concern are recent findings which suggest that video games portray images of women as sexualized targets of violence [Dill, Gentile, Richter, & Dill, in press]. Combining violence with sexualized images of women has been shown to promote violence towards women, rape myth acceptance, and anti-women attitudes [e.g., Donnerstein & Malamuth, 1997; Dill & Dill, 2005].

Similarly, childhood obesity and diabetes are rising as kids’ physical activity declines. In Chapter 1, Roberts and Foehr remind us that in the early days of TV, children were not accepted as potential targets of TV ads. Today, due in part to their level of disposable income, kids are a highly-sought-after target group, with advertisers specifically designing programming to get their attention [Bartholow, Dill, Anderson, & Lindsay, 2003]. Clearly our children are unwitting targets of advertisers, much to the detriment of their collective well-being.

*Kids & Media in America* underscores the pervasive nature of the media in the daily lives of American children. For me, this calls into question our tendency to accept as inevitable this usurping of our kids’ free time for the gain of American business dollars. Indeed, the authors note that many parents do not even know how much media their children are exposed to. The authors further suggest that ‘many parents do not really believe that media messages make all that much difference in their children’s lives’ (p. 200). As a media expert, let me emphatically say that this assumption is dangerous and naïve. As parents, we owe it to our children to resist the temptation to become comfortable with what is common media use just because it is so common. Simply put, limiting media use both avoids threats and enhances opportunities for the greater well-being of our children.

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**References**


