

International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics
Volume 10 Number 3

© 2014 Intellect Ltd Commentaries. English language. doi: 10.1386/macp.10.3.355_3

KRISTIINA KRUISE AND VERONIKA KALMUS
University of Tartu

When the villain remains unpunished: Unintended effects of the social mediation of young children's TV viewing

1. Television viewing is a regular everyday activity for most children in the
2. modern world. Despite the steady rise of new media, television has remained
3. the most dominant medium in an increasingly media-rich environment
4. among preschool children for whom watching TV is the most time-consuming
5. activity other than sleep (Vandewater et al. 2007).
6. According to a widely accepted theoretical view within the media effects
7. research tradition, time spent in front of the television influences children's
8. emotional and cognitive development. On the positive side, TV viewing
9. is related to improved creative ability, better school-readiness and higher
10. ambitions (Anderson et al. 2001), greater interest in books, wider vocabulary
11. and language-learning (Krcmar 2007), and pro-social attitudes and positive
12. moral lessons (Hardy and Claborne 2007). On the negative side, studies have
13. linked excessive TV viewing with poor fitness and overweight (Hancox 2004),
14. sleeping disorders (Feiss and Hoges 2000), and immorality, aggression and
15. diminished social skills (Lemish 2007; Vandewater et al. 2007). Television is

also blamed for wasting children's time that could have otherwise been spent more constructively (Anderson et al. 2001).

Many authors (e.g. Buckingham 2003), however, stress the dynamic nature of children's media experiences and the importance of contextual variables in determining the outcomes of TV viewing. Similarly, this article holds the view that television as a medium is not good or bad in itself; the influence depends on how it is used. The theoretical foundations of this study have roots in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory that stresses the importance of the social and cultural context, including joint activities and interactions with significant others, in children's development.

In parallel to the predominance of the media effects research tradition, children's media relations have primarily been studied within the protectionist model of childhood, which sees children as vulnerable, dependent and in need of protection from media threats by knowledgeable adults (Kalmus 2012). As a result, unintended or undesirable effects of parental interventions have seldom been the focus of researchers' attention. By abandoning the protectionist paradigm in favour of a child-centred and context-sensitive approach, this study aims to feature family interactions and the social mediation of children's media use in their complexity and contradiction. We focus on less explored and unexpected aspects of kindergarten children's TV viewing as mediated by parents and siblings, highlighting unintended effects of social mediation.

SOCIAL MEDIATION OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA USE

The concept of social mediation originates in socialization theory and is related to the research field of media socialization. In its essence, 'social mediation' is a multidimensional, higher-order construct that embraces a considerable variety of types of social interactions between children and socializing agents (parents, siblings, other relatives, teachers and peers), as well as specific child-rearing techniques, practices and strategies employed within families (Kirwil 2009; Chakroff and Nathanson 2011). On a broader level of generalization, the social mediation of children's media use can be divided into two categories: *social support*, i.e. help, guidance, co-use and co-interpreting, provided by any socializing agents, and *rules and restrictions*, set predominantly by parents or teachers (Kalmus 2012). On a more concrete level, several typologies of parental strategies for mediating children's use of media have been proposed, the most common being a tripartite categorization, distinguishing between *active mediation* (talking about the media content), *restrictive mediation* (setting rules and restrictions) and *co-use* (sharing the experience; Livingstone 2009).

As most of previous research on the social mediation of children's media use has, more or less explicitly, followed the protectionist paradigm, only a few studies have focussed on the unintended or undesirable effects of interventions (see Chakroff and Nathanson 2011). Nevertheless, some theoretical generalizations can be drawn from these studies. First, active mediation or co-viewing, if not providing the tools for evaluating and contextualizing potentially harmful media content (e.g. frightening or aggressive content, unrealistic body images, gender stereotypes) may simply draw children's attention to the detrimental content and increase their involvement in the material, making them more likely to be affected by it. Furthermore, if active mediation or co-viewing communicates to children that the content is realistic,

1. media effects become more likely. Second, restrictive mediation may make
 2. children or adolescents more curious about the forbidden content (e.g. violent
 3. or sexual content); thus, they are more likely to watch it with friends, or simply
 4. feel angry and resentful.

5. Rootedness within socialization theory conditions social mediation to
 6. be contextualized in relation to socialization cultures, guided by mores and
 7. values (cf. Kirwil 2009). In the micro-level context, many recent studies (e.g.
 8. Dorey et al. 2009) view social mediation of children's TV viewing as being
 9. closely related to or forming part of overall child-rearing practices, everyday
 10. routines, and communication and relationships patterns in families. In a wider
 11. socio-economic context, parents' ability to fulfil their child-rearing tasks,
 12. including media socialization, depends largely on the availability of supportive
 13. social settings such as flexibility of job schedules and childcare opportunities
 14. (cf. Bronfenbrenner 1979). These, in turn, are subject to welfare and gender
 15. regimes and corresponding institutional arrangements, which, by influenc-
 16. ing parents' time resources, child-rearing knowledge and skills, and alloca-
 17. tion of socializing tasks between themselves and public institutions, have
 18. some bearing on parental mediation of children's media use (Kalmus and
 19. Roosalu 2011).

20. **CONDUCTING THE STUDY IN ESTONIAN KINDERGARTENS**

21. Estonia, a post-socialist country with a neo-liberal ideological regime,
 22. represents a distinguishable context for studying the social mediation of
 23. children's media use. Egalitarian full-time labour market participation has
 24. resulted in 88 per cent of children aged 3–6 years attending kindergar-
 25. ten (Statistics Estonia 2013). No curriculum-based media literacy train-
 26. ing is conducted in kindergarten classes, and teachers presume that mainly
 27. the parents should fulfil the role of mediating children's media experiences
 28. (Siibak and Vinter 2010).

29. To select kindergartens for the study, a non-probability purposeful
 30. sampling was used. The first criterion was to select kindergartens with mixed-
 31. age classes to interview children at different ages. Letters were sent to kindergar-
 32. tens matching the criterion. Among the kindergartens showing interest in
 33. participating in the study, one from the capital city and another from a small
 34. town were selected. Written consent from the parents was obtained, after
 35. which children volunteered to talk with the researcher.

36. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 children aged 4–7
 37. years (eight children aged 4 years, four aged 5, four aged 6, two aged 7; seven
 38. girls and eleven boys). As the interviews with younger children were two to
 39. three times shorter (about fifteen minutes), more young children were inter-
 40. viewed to achieve data saturation.

41. Children were asked about their television viewing habits and situations
 42. (what shows they like and dislike, with whom they watch TV, what kind of
 43. restrictions they have on TV viewing, etc.). The interviews were combined
 44. with a projective technique: children were asked to look at five photo collages,
 45. representing 44 programmes aired on Estonian channels during the previous
 46. month, and to name the programmes they had seen.

47. To provide background data, two focus group interviews with 23 kindergar-
 48. ten teachers from across Estonia are also drawn upon in this study.

49. Qualitative content analysis, embracing both theory-driven and inductive
 50. approaches (Mayring 2000), was used for analysing the transcribed interviews.

TV VIEWING IN THE FAMILY CONTEXT

Our study confirmed that children's TV viewing is largely related to several contextual factors such as the presence and age of siblings, parents' and grandparents' viewing preferences, and consensus or different opinions on understanding the need for social mediation within the family. Consistent with several previous studies (e.g. Saxbe et al. 2011), our findings indicated that children are co-viewers mainly when they watch adult or family programmes, and are solo viewers when watching children's programmes. The types of programmes Estonian children watch with grown-ups largely depend on the age and gender of the family member. For example, children reported watching drama serials usually with their mothers, crime serials or action movies with their fathers and soap operas with their grandmothers.

Estonian children's utterances provide some insights into generational differences in media preferences and power hierarchies enacted through them. It is quite common for parents to direct children's media choices by forbidding some cartoons such as *The Simpsons* (1989) or *Futurama* (1999) and permitting others. Children's programmes tend to be 'boring' for parents who often leave children watching the approved programmes alone as 'it is safe'. From the perspective of media socialization, parents thus miss the opportunity to contribute to the educational potential of the programmes made especially for children, such as fostering pro-social attitudes and positive moral lessons (Hardy and Claborne 2007). Nor can they react to potential negative behaviours seen on children's programmes such as immorality or aggression (Lemish 2007; Vandewater et al. 2007).

Parents' viewing preferences may, either deliberately or unintentionally, be imposed upon all family members, including small children. According to kindergarten teachers, children are often 'forced co-viewers', having to follow their parents' viewing habits due to lack of other programme options. Interviews with children, however, revealed their perspective involving independent agency: if they dislike the programme, they usually leave TV for other activities, for instance they go to play in their room. Nevertheless, children may stay and watch TV despite the age-inappropriateness of the show. The list of programmes children claimed to have followed as co-viewers includes war, catastrophe and action movies, serious dramas, and frightening and disturbing scenes (e.g., shootings, fire, death, blood and injured people). The extent of colourful details in their descriptions reflects the level of children's disturbance.

CO-VIEWING AS SOCIAL INTERACTION

Children's descriptions of co-viewing reflected the social nature of the activity. In this sense, our findings support previous studies, according to which TV forms an important part of family interactions (Dorey et al. 2009) and serves as a cultural space where family closeness and sociability are enacted (Holloway and Green 2008). Watching some programmes can be a ritual and part of family traditions, and give children a sense of inclusion. For example, a 7-year-old boy described how he watched sports news every evening with his father, and many children often watched the news, especially the weather forecast, with the family.

Co-viewing is sometimes accompanied by active mediation. Children described parents explaining TV content, if they asked questions such as 'What animal is that?' or 'Why did this person do that?' According to the children,

1. however, active mediation usually consists in parental responses to children's
 2. initiative questions, and not so often in parents' take-up of topics. Furthermore,
 3. parents often practised co-viewing without any discussion and probably lacking
 4. full awareness of the content's potential outcomes for the child. For example, a
 5. child described how the whole family – mother, father, an older sister and the
 6. child – watched a very dramatic Estonian movie *Class: Life After* (Raag, 2010)
 7. on teenage bullying ending with a fatal school shooting.

8. Interestingly, our study revealed gendered aspects of co-viewing. Children
 9. described dramatic scenes from war or action movies they had watched with
 10. their fathers. In the most extreme case, presented by a teacher, a 4-year-old
 11. boy had co-viewed a pornographic movie with his teenage brother. Children's
 12. accounts also included vivid recollections of arguments between fathers and
 13. mothers about suitable content for co-viewing:

14.
 15. Dad watches those movies [with shooting scenes] and I start watching,
 16. too. Mom asks dad to change the channel, but dad doesn't change.
 17. (Girl, 4 years old)

18. **RESTRICTIVE MEDIATION AND ITS UNINTENDED EFFECTS**

19.
 20.
 21. Restrictive mediation, practised through setting time limits on TV viewing or
 22. forbidding certain content, is a common strategy among Estonian parents.
 23. Children, however, may simply evade parental restrictions by secretly peeking
 24. at what parents are watching:

25.
 26. Even if Dr House was nice again, mom and dad didn't allow me to
 27. watch it [...] but I could still peek a little bit.
 28. (Boy, 6 years old)

29.
 30. Older siblings seem to be unwilling to take up the role of active or restrictive
 31. mediators. Moreover, they may occasionally sabotage parental restrictions for
 32. younger children in the family – either because they are not aware of the rules
 33. or because they do not feel obliged to follow the same rules or socialize with
 34. their younger siblings:

35.
 36. I like some scary movies that my brothers watch. They let me watch
 37. because they don't know that I am not allowed to see those.
 38. (Girl, 6 years old)

39.
 40. According to our study, restrictive mediation may also lead to unintended
 41. outcomes. It was common for parents to apply a practice we suggest term-
 42. ing as *interruptive restrictions*: children could co-view crime serials such as *CSI*
 43. (2000) or *Kättemaksukontor (Office of Revenge)* (2009) with their parents, but due
 44. to the late hour, they had to go to sleep in the middle of the episode. Thus, the
 45. children could not follow the culmination of the plot line and the moral lesson
 46. of the villain getting caught. Considering that watching TV before bedtime is
 47. one of the main reasons for children's sleeping disorders (Feiss and Hoges
 48. 2000), and violence remaining without punishment is harmful (Bushman and
 49. Huesmann 2001), it can be suggested that if children have already started to
 50. watch a crime drama, it is better to let them watch the whole episode. One
 51. of the reasons that parents apply interruptive restrictions might be their
 52. underestimation of the genre-specific narrative power and children's cognitive

needs, combined with an internalized parental obligation to limit children's late-night TV viewing.

TELEVISION AS A MODERN REARING AID

Our findings indicated that parents take advantage of television to motivate, discipline and punish their children. For example, according to kindergarten teachers it is quite common for children to watch TV early in the morning before going to kindergarten, as parents use the promise of watching a favourite cartoon to motivate children to wake up. Usually, however, there is not enough time to finish the full episode, leading to interrupted viewing experiences that, according to teachers, are deeply frustrating for children.

Television narratives may serve as a means for parents to discipline children. For instance, a boy told us that his mother had threatened to call Urr (a fictional character who can freeze all living things in its way) and tell Urr to freeze his toys when the child did not want to tidy up and go to sleep. The boy was confused as to whether Urr is reality or fiction.

What do you think, does Urr really exist?

No. /---/ ... but once my mom said that she would call Urr, but I didn't understand how she can call him. /---/ I was afraid. I don't want Urr to come to my home.

(Boy, 5 years old)

As young children are still learning to distinguish TV fantasy and reality (Lemish 2007), parents unwillingly inhibit the development of children's media competences by using fictional TV characters as a real threat to discipline children.

LOOKING AHEAD

According to a common view within the protectionist model of childhood, parents are the ones who make decisions about children's media consumption and take responsibility for guiding their children to make competent and reasonable choices as they age. The child-centred and contextual approach adopted in this study provides a richer and more complicated view on parents as social actors in the process of media socialization. While occasionally employing strategies of social mediation as knowledgeable and responsible agents, parents are also constrained and impelled by the domestic social environment and broader social structures to rely on and make pragmatic use of media as a rearing aid. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains, in as much as children have their own ecological system, so do parents, and these systems are in mutual interaction. According to the micro-level perspective of audience ethnography and everyday life, parents have other duties at home after a working day. Television thus serves as a convenient way to keep young children busy unsupervised, as parents also admitted in a study by Dorey et al. (2011). Furthermore, the de-synchronized nature of TV programmes and families' daily routines, forces parents to practise interruptive restrictions with their undesirable cognitive and emotional effects.

From the macro-level perspective, we may argue that the neo-liberal type of the post-socialist welfare regime, prevalent in Estonia, by combining the universal breadwinner model with low part-time options, probably leaves

1. the parents with scanty time and energy to dedicate to their children's media
 2. socialization (Kalmus and Roosalu 2011). Furthermore, relatively good provi-
 3. sion of public childcare may entice parents to outsource socializing tasks,
 4. including media education, to kindergartens and schools, thus playing a more
 5. passive and consumerist role themselves.

6. The main limitation of this study is its small and non-representative
 7. sample. Nevertheless, we may assume that the very manifestation of some
 8. parental strategies and their unintended effects on this small sample indicates
 9. a more widespread nature of these phenomena, which remains to be tested in
 10. further studies. Furthermore, this analysis was based only on children's and
 11. teachers' perspectives. It would be insightful to study children, parents and
 12. older siblings simultaneously in the same study to understand the complexity
 13. and interconnectedness of the roles of different agents in children's ecological
 14. microsystem in relation to their media use.

15. Our findings imply that parents are probably aware of the importance of
 16. television in children's lives, and they try to use TV as a modern rearing aid and
 17. a means to educate and entertain their children. Several unintended and un-
 18. desired outcomes revealed in this analysis, however, suggest that more attention
 19. should be paid to raising parents' awareness of the specificity of the medium of
 20. television and the potential outcomes of different strategies of social mediation.

22. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

23. The preparation of this article was supported by ETF grant (8527) of the
 24. Estonian Research Council, institutional research funding IUT (20–38) of
 25. the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, and the Doctoral School
 26. of Behavioural, Social and Health Sciences created under the auspices of the
 27. European Social Fund.

30. REFERENCES

31. Anderson, D. R., Huston, A. C., L. Schmitt, K., Linebarger, D., Wright, J. C. and
 32. Reed, L. (2001), 'Early childhood television viewing and adolescent beha-
 33. vior: The recontact study', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child*
 34. *Development*, 66: 1, pp. 1–147.
35. Buckingham, D. (2003), *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary*
 36. *Culture*, Cambridge: Polity.
37. ● Bushman, B. J. and Huesmann, L. R. (2001), 'Effects of televised violence on
 38. aggression', in D. Singer and J. Singer (eds), *Handbook of Children and the*
 39. *Media*, London: Sage, pp. 223–54.
40. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979), *Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by*
 41. *Nature and Design*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
42. Chakroff, J. L. and Nathanson, A. I. (2011), 'Parent and school interventions:
 43. Mediation and media literacy', in S. L. Calvert and B. J. Wilson (eds), *The*
 44. *Handbook of Children, Media, and Development*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,
 45. pp. 552–76.
46. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000), USA: CBS Television Studios.
47. Dorey, E. E., Roberts, V. V., Maddison, R. R., Meagher-Lundberg, P. P., Dixon,
 48. R. R. and Ni Mhurchu, C. C. (2010), 'Children and television watching: A
 49. qualitative study of New Zealand parents' perceptions and views', *Child:*
 50. *Care, Health & Development*, 36: 3, pp. 414–20.
51. Feiss, P. and Hoges, F. M. (2000), *Sweet Dreams: A Pediatrician's Secrets for Your*
 52. *Child's Good Night Sleep*, Lincolnwood, IL: Lowel House.

- Futurama* (1999), USA: FOX. 1.
- Hancox, R., Milne, B. and Poulton, R. (2004), 'Association between child and adolescent television viewing and adult health: A longitudinal birth cohort study', *The Lancet (Sciencedirect)*, 364: 9430, pp. 257–62. 2.
- Hardy, S. and Claborne, G. (2007), 'Moral messages on television', in J. J. Arnett (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents and the Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 810–11. 3.
- Holloway, D. and Green, L. (2008), 'Room to view: Family television use in the Australian context', *Television & New Media*, 9: 1, pp. 47–61. 4.
- Kalmus, V. (2012), 'Making sense of the social mediation of children's internet use: Perspectives for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research', in C. W. Wijnen, S. Trültzsch and C. Ortner (eds), *Medienwelten im Wandel: Kommunikationswissenschaftliche Positionen, Perspektiven und Konsequenzen/ Changing media worlds: Positions, perspectives and consequences for communication research*, Vienna: Springer, pp. 137–49. 5.
- Kalmus, V. and Roosalu, T. (2011), 'Parental mediation of EU kids' internet use revisited: Looking for a complex model of cross-national differences', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 7: 1, pp. 55–66. 6.
- Kirwil, L. (2009), 'Parental mediation of children's internet use in different European countries', *Journal of Children and Media*, 3: 4, pp. 394–409. 7.
- Krcmar, M. (2007), 'Television and language learning' in J. J. Arnett (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Children, Adolescents and the Media*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 462–63. 8.
- Kättemaksukontor/Office of Revenge* (2009), Estonia: TV3. 9.
- Lemish, D. (2007), *Children and Television: A Global Perspective*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 10.
- Livingstone, S. (2009), *Children and the Internet*, Cambridge: Polity. 11.
- Mayring, P. (2000), 'Qualitative content analysis', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 1: 2, article 20, <http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204>. Accessed 25 July 2014. 12.
- Raag, I. (2010), *Class: Life After*, Tallinn: Eesti Televisioon. 13.
- Saxbe, D., Graesch, A. and Alyik, M. (2011), 'Television as a social or solo activity: Understanding families' everyday television viewing patterns', *Communication Research Reports*, 28: 2, pp. 180–89. 14.
- Siibak, A. and Vinter, K. (2010), 'Making sense of the virtual world for young children: Estonian pre-school teachers' experiences and perceptions', *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 3: 2, pp. 3–27. 15.
- Statistics Estonia (2013), 'Social life – education – preprimary education', <http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>. Accessed 25 July 2014. 16.
- The Simpsons* (1989), USA: FOX. 17.
- Vandewater, E. A., Rideout, V. J., Wartella, E. A., Huang, X., Lee, J. H. and Shim, M. (2007), 'Digital childhood: Electronic media and technology use among infants, toddlers, and preschoolers', *Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, 119: 5, pp. e1006–e1015. 18.
- SUGGESTED CITATION** 19.
- Kruuse, K., and Kalmus, V. (2014), 'When the villain remains unpunished: Unintended effects of the social mediation of young children's TV viewing', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* 10: 3, pp. 355–363, doi: 10.1386/macp.10.3.355_3 20.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kristiina Kruuse (M.A.) is a Ph.D. student of media and communication at University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research interests involve young children's media consumption and media effects on children.

Contact: Kristiina Kruuse, Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, 51014 Tartu, Estonia.

E-mail: kristiina.kruuse@gmail.com

Veronika Kalmus (Ph.D.) is Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Estonia. Her research focuses on socialization, inter-generational relationships, media and time use, and cultural values.

Contact: Veronika Kalmus, Institute of Social Studies, University of Tartu, Lossi 36, 51014 Tartu, Estonia.

E-mail: veronika.kalmus@ut.ee

Kristiina Kruuse and Veronika Kalmus have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
