

The Interplay of Technological Transformation and Childhood Media Culture: A Dynamic Comparison of Change and Continuity

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Abstract: This essay aims to explore the rationale for using technological advancements as a key foundation for assessing the continuity or change in childhood media culture, while comparing the recent changes and continuities in this domain. The study argues that the changes and continuities in childhood media culture stem from the "struggle" between children and adults, a dynamic facilitated by technological advancements. These advancements enable children to access and produce media content more broadly, thereby challenging the adult-dominated media culture. Consequently, it is reasonable to use technology as a basis for comparing the continuity and change in childhood media culture. Building on this perspective, the essay posits that the continuity and change in childhood media culture, driven by new media technologies, are no longer simple opposites but represent a complex and dynamic interactive pattern, contingent upon the extent to which children overcome adult control.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) has fundamentally transformed the media environment. Continuous dissemination of information and interactive innovations have profoundly reshaped children's media participation, significantly expanding the breadth of their access to information. This essay seeks to theoretically establish the intersection of technology, children, and media culture, laying the groundwork for using technology as a foundation for comparing the changes and continuities in childhood media culture. Based on this theoretical framework, the study examines changes and continuities in childhood media culture in two subdomains: media content and forms of media interaction, in the context of digital technological advancements.

2. Theorising the Intersection of Technology, Childhood and Media Culture

Before proceeding further, it seems necessary to theorise the direct and indirect relationships between technology, childhood and media culture, which can help to elucidate the rationale for using technology as a tool for assessing the changeability and continuity of childhood media culture over the decades.

On the one hand, in recent decades, technology has driven changes in media patterns that have contributed to social and cultural change. In terms of technological determinism, as noted by the famous technological determinist Harold Innis (1951), technological progress affects information dissemination first and foremost, and the dominant media tend to shape the organisational forms, stages of development, and characteristics of society^[1]. In recent decades, from computers to the Internet to advanced telecommunication facilities, cable television, and satellite communications, technology has played a decisive role in shaping the ways in which modern societies shape cultural exchanges and social connections (Narula, 2006)^[2]. As articulated by Hauer (2017), the information age is a product of the combination of information technology and advanced communication systems, characterised by a shift from the manufacturing-based social structure of the industrial age to one centred on services and information^[3]. Social determinists, however, argue that technology itself cannot spontaneously produce change, and that change is driven by human behaviour, with people choosing, creating, applying and effecting social change through technology, and from this perspective, technology is a social product (Janssen, 2014)^[4]. This essay aims to go beyond a simple affirmation or critique of technological determinism. Importantly, as Hamilton and Heflin (2011, p. 1052) emphasise, rather than adhering to polarised perspectives, it is more crucial to identify the point of departure of both theories: the hypothetical separation of technology from society^[5]. This split can lead to a narrow understanding of the relationship between the two. As Slack and Wise also (2002) put it, the theoretical problem that technological determinism sidesteps is how to find a way to understand the role of technology and to recognise that technology has always already been part of culture and society, rather than a cause or effect of culture^[6]. On a practical level, it is undeniable that innovations in digital technology have significantly contributed to the evolution of media forms, revolutionising the way interactions are carried out and bringing about the diversification and personalisation of content (Schroeder, 2018)^[7]. In short, it seems more reasonable to move away from determinism and place technology in interactivity with society and culture, and therefore, technological advancement as part of society and culture is both a critical dimension and a criterion not to be ignored when comparing continuity and change in childhood media culture in recent decades.

On the other hand, media culture is a tool to record the changes of childhood, which evolves with the times. From a historical perspective, childhood is viewed as a socially constructed concept that is fluid and changeable, shaped by historical and cultural factors rather than a naturally existing fixed category (Norozzi and Moen, 2016)^[8]. Societal understandings and expectations of childhood have changed significantly over different historical periods, and these changes have been heavily influenced by the social, economic and political context of the time (Coulter, 2020)^[9]. In this context, the media has played a key role in recording and mapping the changing concepts of childhood. By analysing portraits of children in pre-modern societies, French historian Philippe Ariès (1962) revealed that during the pre-modern period, children were often visually presented as adults, with clothing and accessories indistinguishable from those of adults (Drotner, 2022, p. 18)^{[10][11]}. However, Ariès' (1962) research has also faced some controversy, with later works questioning some of his assumptions, methods and conclusions (Prout, 2005)^[12]. Nonetheless, the focus of this essay is not to delve into this controversy, but rather to emphasise how the medium serves as a recording tool for historical change. As Holland (2008) argues, the media (images) constructs powerful social perceptions through selective narratives that not only depict the nature of childhood, but are also intimately linked to the broader segregation of society by class, gender and race^[13]. Thus, media culture is closely linked to the evolution of the concept of childhood; firstly, the media as a recording tool that reflects the evolution of childhood and children in the context of different eras; furthermore, by assessing the representations of childhood and children presented in the media, it is possible to detect the change and stability of the media culture of childhood in the evolution of time.

It is worth noting that the relationship between technology and childhood or children seems to be

established subliminally; as mentioned above, the development of technology, especially digital technology, is intertwined with social and cultural change, then childhood and children as a socially constructed mobility may change with it, which may indirectly lead to a dynamic change in childhood media culture. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, media culture, childhood and technology are intertwined, and technology may directly or indirectly affect childhood media culture, which lays the foundation for technology as an observation of the evolution of childhood media culture, and in order to further argue this point, this essay will provide a comprehensive comparison of the changes and continuities of childhood media culture based on two aspects of media content and interactivity, respectively, in the next sections, and will continue to substantiate the rationale of technology as a basis for judgment.

3. Shifts in Media Content and Interactivity

Over the past few decades, media content and media interactivity have changed radically with the rapid development of digital technology, which further provides children with the opportunity to create and receive more media content; in other words, media content and interactivity have become the sub-grounds for comparing the continuity and change of childhood media culture, whose rationality will be discussed in this part. Specifically, this part will first explore how the richness and diversity of media content have gradually blurred the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, thus bringing about significant changes in childhood media culture, and then elaborate on the changes in interactivity brought about by digital technology, which has transformed children from passive recipients to creators of media content, breaking the monopoly of media culture by adults. However, despite the innovations brought about by digital technology, the importance of traditional media has not diminished, and the control of media is still mainly in the hands of adults, so childhood media culture still shows considerable continuity in traditional values, such as identity, race, etc.

3.1 "Uncontrolled Children's Media Content"

On the one hand, digital media has broken down the boundaries between children and adults, greatly expanding the media culture of childhood, which is particularly evident in the "invasion" of adult-exclusive cultural content defined as such into the realm of childhood media culture. According to Prout (2005)^[12], information and communication technologies (ICTs) have begun to reshape children's social position and the nature of childhood; through their interactions with media and communication technologies, the breadth of children's experiences is expanded, and the range of images, knowledge and values to which they are exposed increases (Prout, 2005)^[12]. In other words, digital media have significantly accelerated the production and dissemination of information, dramatically increasing its accessibility beyond the limitations of traditional media, which has led to a shift away from relying solely on adults or books as a single source of information acquisition, and children are able to easily access a vast amount of information through the Internet, digital television, and other mediums, with the result that adult control over information is greatly diminished. Thus, in recent decades, advances in digital technology have greatly expanded the scope of childhood media culture, i.e., parts of what was originally considered adult media culture have entered the realm of childhood media culture, adding variability to it.

Although children's viewing habits have shifted from traditional linear television to video-on-demand services offered through the Internet, adults still play a decisive role in the decision-making, funding, and distribution of content (Steemers, 2022, p. 101)^[14]. In other words, adults still hold control of the media and thus influence the content that affects it. As Donald and Brown (2022) state, children's films that have been representing traditional media are not really designed for children, but are conceived and implemented by adults to socialise children, teach, and enlighten them about, for

example, their position in socio-political structures, how to be a consumer, and the way interpersonal relationships are negotiated^[15]. Therefore, while the widespread use of digital media has dramatically enriched the media content available to children, traditional media content is still tightly controlled by adults, which has led to a certain degree of continuity in media content.

On the other hand, the development of Internet technology has made possible globalised media distribution, thus breaking down traditional notions of childhood and indirectly triggering a change in media culture, which is mainly reflected in increased cultural diversity. As Lemish (2022) points out, the fact that television, film, computers, mobile devices and handheld video games have become part of everyday life marks the characteristics of children of the new millennium living in a global media culture, and, as Olson and Rampaul (2013) point out, the Internet has contributed to the normalisation of the global exchange of cinema and television images, which has widely disseminated multicultural images of childhood, such as the films *Pahuna* (2018) and *House of Hummingbird* (2019) have adopted non-Western approaches to childhood (Olson and Rampaul, 2013)^{[16][17]}. In short, the digital environment has enabled the global dissemination of diverse concepts of childhood and children, no longer constrained by Western domination. However, the existence of the digital divide remains a significant challenge, not only limiting the access of children in less developed regions to global children's media culture, but also making it difficult for children in developed countries to access children's image culture in these relatively deprived regions. Despite the failure of digital technology to spread globally, media efforts in some non-Western countries have succeeded to some extent in demonstrating the diversity of childhood media culture, partially counteracting the homogenising narrative impact of traditional Western media (Olson and Rampaul, 2013)^[17]. For example, according to Sayfo (2018, p. 113), countries such as Egypt have used Disney animation as a source of inspiration for 'Islamised animation production', combining Disney's narrative techniques with indigenous children's Islamic narratives to create geographically specific media content^[18].

Thus, the development of digital technology has not only blurred the boundaries between adulthood and childhood, making adult messages part of childhood media culture, but has also facilitated the global spread of children's media culture, which has led to children's media in countries of the global South to gradually challenge the dominance of traditional Western media, thus contributing to the development of diversity in childhood media culture. However, while the existence of the digital divide has resulted in children in less developed regions being placed more in a position of passive acceptance of Western media culture, maintaining a degree of cultural continuity, some non-Western countries are nevertheless attempting to break out of this situation through cultural integration, adding a new impetus to the diversification of childhood media culture.

3.2 Interactivity and Childhood Media Culture

Digital media has made children no longer just consumers of media content, but also creators, whose media content is breaking through traditional media content dominated by adults and integrating into the childhood media culture; in other words, children have shifted from being passive consumers of content to being creators of content, who are able to actively produce and share content through social media and content creation platforms to produce and share content actively, and this engagement not only enhances their social skills, creativity and self-expression, but also significantly changes their cultural status and social roles (Reid Chassiakos et al., 2016)^[19]. As Coulter (2020) points out, today, from making videos on YouTube to producing online games, children often create content in ways that challenge the limited and restrictive options offered by corporate entities^[9]. A prime example of this is the 'Mobile Movie' programme, in which schoolchildren use their mobile phones to make films that are then broadcast on YouTube (Johanson, 2010)^[20].

However, the use of shifts in interaction patterns as a uniform criterion for assessing the continuity and variability of childhood media culture across the globe may be unfair, ignoring differences between different regions of the globe. In regions with weaker economies or limited educational resources, children may not have access to advanced technology, which limits their ability to engage with new forms of media (Buckingham, 2007)^[21]. Furthermore, as Livingstone and Third (2017) point out, the political economy that shapes children's internet culture remains strong, and digital environments continue to be defined in an adult-centred way, motivated by political and commercial drivers, which in turn limits the scope of children's agency and tends to ignore their rights in the digital environment^[22]. That is to say, while forms of interaction have changed, their use and the formulation of their content remain constrained by adult-defined frameworks and perspectives, a situation that reflects the continuity of childhood media cultures more than the variability, as the underlying logic and control of media use has not really shifted into the hands of children.

Nonetheless, as Banaji (2015) points out, despite their limited access to digital media, poor working-class children in India have found ways to engage, showing the complexities of their lives through selfies in social media narratives of work, education, resource gathering, and family care, and these positive expressions of self-expression allow non-Western children to continue to contribute to the growing landscape of children's representation contributing to, and challenging, restrictive Western paradigms^[23]; furthermore, Danah Boyd (2007), in a report on a study of MySpace use, found that when young people used computers in adult-controlled domestic spaces, they created public Internet spaces in order to hang out, negotiate identities, and gain status and recognition under the supervision of adults^[24].

In general, the evolution of interactivity brought about by technological developments has expanded the scope and content of childhood media culture by allowing children to become creators of media content outside of adult control. However, there seems to be a need to recognise that the dissemination and reception of information is still controlled by adults, and this leads to a significant degree of perpetuation of the adult-defined dilemma of childhood media culture.

4. Conclusion

This essay illustrates the validity of technology as a ground for comparing continuity and change in childhood media cultures, and creatively proposes to situate continuity and change in childhood media cultures in the context of ongoing interactions between children and adults, or childhood and adulthood. Specifically, childhood media culture appears to show a degree of variability when children are supported by technological advances and thus given more space, such as access to a wider range of information or the creation of more media content; however, the continued dominance of adults in media production and distribution maintains a degree of continuity in childhood media culture, revealing the complexities and hierarchical nature. It would seem that future research should continue to explore how technology shapes the socio-cultural meanings of childhood and examine the continuity and variability in this process in order to better understand the role and impact of childhood media culture in modern society.

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