

The Electronic Invasion in the Playroom

Edith Slembek
(edith.slembek@bluewin.ch)

Electronic media are today's front-runners – television, radio, newspapers are losing ground. This raises questions – what, for instance, happens when the media usage of people is limited exclusively to electronic media, and not just for adults but even more so for children and youth. They learn media usage from adults in early childhood. When they grow up, they continue their early-learned behavior and probably develop their own manner of dealing with electronic media. What are the implications for the personal development and the future of children and youth who have been hooked on electronic media – computers, video games, radio, television, cell phones, tablets – for years?

Some effects of the change in media on older adults

Within the last twenty years, electronic media have penetrated every aspect of life. This penetration of every aspect of life there happened at least one decade later than in the U.S.

The infiltration into everyday life with electronic media has led to a drastic change in media usage.

Who has been affected by this change and how? This is age related and depends on the society and the social class. An implication of this change is the demand for more advanced literacy skills in the work place. But not everyone possesses adequate reading or writing skills. In Germany, Switzerland, and other European countries the current estimate is that 13 to 19% of the population still cannot read and write, despite attending school for at least nine years they are still secondary illiterates. Many of these individuals were still able for years to fulfill simple tasks in factories; they could operate machinery and so were able to earn their livelihood. But ever since machinery has been computer-

ized and monitor messages must be read by the operator to click at least a "Yes" or "No" answer, many of these people are now unemployed without a chance of obtaining another job ever again. "If they cannot read, they no longer have a chance" (Döbert/Nickel 2000). Scores of adults have since participated in literacy programs, but they have already fallen behind so far that they can never catch up again. Even worse, they report being shunned by society economically, culturally, and socially. This exactly is the group of people who cannot use the computer and the Internet to benefit themselves. And this is also the group who – due to their illiteracy - cannot extract differentiated information from printed media to form their own opinion on political issues. Their media usage is limited to radio and television – whatever their information is worth. We all know how small and often distorted information from these media are and consequently to what extent information about democratically relevant issues never reaches this group of citizens.

But the new media also affect people who have held distinct positions without ever learning how to use electronic media and to get information about important issues, people who were close to retirement when this technique was introduced. Their secretary cared for the computer-linked tasks. This group can read, write and has access to newspapers and books. Therefore they have different possibilities to get information about relevant political issues and to form a decision on them.

Taking both groups mentioned above into account, it is still estimated that approximately 30 – 40% of the population is unable to take advantage of any possible benefits offered by electronic media in Germany (ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de).

Children and Youth

The present generation of the five- to 20-year-olds has grown up with computers, digital games and the Internet – they are the Digital Natives. By now, almost every playroom is equipped with a computer and video game station. Parents are giving their children these games at an increasingly earlier age. For boys, it holds true that since 2002 the computer is regarded to be even more indispensable than the television, and they are becoming more and more attached to the possibilities the Internet offers. Although girls are catching up, they are still less pre-occupied with computers (Wienholz 2010, 1).

What are the consequences? At the same time, reading competence among male youths has decreased significantly. More than 80% of the youth with weak reading and writing skills are males. The reason for this might be the large amount of time they spend in front of the computer. In 1990, the weak reading competence of these youths – which was already present then but less pronounced than now – was blamed on extensive male television consumption. In 1980, Winn wrote in *The Plug-in Drug (The Drug in the Living Room*, German title of the book) and offered an antidote: “Turn it off!” Today it is apparent that the media consumption of young males has not diminished, but has switched from the television to the computer.

Within the context of German exams held by the Goethe Institute, we interviewed 50 youths between the age of 17 and 22 about their hobbies. Some of them are enjoying sports; quite a few like watching TV, listening to music, and going out with their friends. And all of them said that they chat daily or play computer games on an average of three to four hours each day. To the question, what are they reading, all except for one woman answered that they do not read newspapers or books, perceiving this as a bore, and that books were much too long; they went on for page after page without anything happening. If they are reading at all, it is limited to brief messages such as commonly used in SMS, emails or chats. The reading of longer, mentally challenging or aesthetically appealing texts or even intense reading for pleasure is no longer a treasured activity of these youth.

But reading, the comprehension of the written word, and the ability to question it can only be learned by vigorously reading a variety of different materials. This development towards non-reading and the resulting implications are confirmed in the PISA statistical analyses encompassing more than twenty European countries. According to the analyses of the 15-year-old youths, only 15% of them are still able to comprehend a written text, to extract significant information from it, to form hypotheses and to ask questions about their reading material (cf: PISA 2000). Is this not reason to feel alarmed?

The question arises, what has led to these alarming conditions? And furthermore: what does this mean for the future of young people?

In 2009, the best-selling gifts for five- to ten-year-old children were electronic gifts such as computers complete with games, as for instance “Optimus Prime Leader,” and the evil “Megatron” for boys. For girls there are rosy-red play stations with the games that go along with them ... or the doll “Baby Born”: She can drink out of the bottle, cry, go potty, and she can even swim. An electronically guided doll – in order to play with her, girls must adhere to the instructions, and this limits them in the use of their own playful imagination. This is clearly visible when watching the demo video: Two laughing girls are standing in front of the doll and watch her going potty to the sound of a melody. Games for boys are focused on fighting and competition; but for girls, the rosy-red world of fairy tales remains firmly in place. To be exact, the traditional roles are still prescribed for boys as well as for girls.

At approximately ten to twelve years of age, children sign up with Facebook, or they Twitter; many spend several hours each day in contact with people they do not know, but they call them “friends” anyhow. The time-honored conception of “friend” is being challenged, or else it must be redefined.

With these gifts, parents are strengthening the bonds between their children and the world of electronics. Many of the children concede that they spend four to five hours after school in front of the computer. This has consequences, and by no means only for their reading skills.

There is no lack of criticism for this development. If children are to grow up into mature adults who are able to reflect on their own actions, cope with conflicts, and play in a team – all skills that are requested in job ads for distinct positions – then the basis for these must be laid in childhood. Children who spend a lot of time in front of the PC or play video games constantly have hardly any time left to play with other children. Playing must not be underestimated. Group play stimulates the imagination, for instance, when play scenes are developed, or during ball games, or when building a hut outside utilizing only materials that are found lying around. Same-aged children playing together in a group develop their social skills by paying attention to each other, discussing how to proceed in the game, arguing with each other, and having to deal with losing sometimes.

If any play at all takes place anymore, it can be observed that - now as ever – girls play with girls; boys play with boys; the playgroup formation is defined by gender. Both groups develop a different communication style based on their gender. This puts women at a disadvantage later in their working life, as the masculine communication style is still dominant and perceived as being superior by society, and its use can be a deciding factor for gaining access to job positions – at least in today's Germany and Switzerland (Datta/Dundlach 2011; and www.rp-online.de/beruf/arbeitswelt). Having said that, it can be observed that more and more girls produce better grades than boys and are better educated; in the future this makes it more difficult to exclude them from higher positions even though they would be qualified for them.

Back to playing and another important aspect: Playing with others stimulates motor skills, requires constant motion. Sitting in school for five to six hours, then riding home in a car and continuing to sit for several hours more in front of the computer, then doing homework afterwards, barely leaves any time for physical exercise or group games. Many of today's children can no longer turn summersaults, have problems with balance, and run at a slower pace and over shorter distances than only ten years ago. Today, many of the large number of overweight children and youth are already suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis.

According to Lehmann,

The parents - but many teachers as well - are not aware just yet of the consequences [of the lack of exercise, E.S.]. The children experience increasing problems in the areas of aware-ness, motor skills, language, but also in their social behaviors. These are the areas that are paramount for the development of the intelligence of our children (2010).

Susan Linn argues that,

while play is crucial to human development and children are born with an innate capacity for make believe, the convergence of ubiquitous technology and unfettered commercialism actually prevents them from playing. In modern-day America, nurturing creative play is not only counter-cultural - it threatens corporate profits (2004).

Neil Postman spoke of the “disappearance of childhood” (1993). The borders between childhood and adulthood disappear, parents want to remain young forever, and children adopt behaviors that used to be reserved for adults. If Postman's ideas still appeared to be doubtful, Linn makes a firm point by stating that the middle childhood between five and ten years of age is disappearing – a time that is decidedly more fruitful for the intellectual development of the child than any other time. These are the years a child needs for personal development to become a mature and discriminating human being.

The 'Father' Generation of Today's Children – the Digital Immigrants

The father generation referred to here, is approximately between 25 and 40 years old, either still climbing the career ladder or having already arrived on top, and perfectly familiar with electronic media. This is apparent for anyone who watches European people on the morning train. The first-class passengers are mostly well-dressed young men, always busy with their laptops, playing games, solving Sudoku puzzles, creating PowerPoint presentations, writing emails or chatting. Others again are seen fumbling with their cell phones, writing SMS, or talk-

ing on the phone. Every few seconds, a call comes in. Some are leafing through one of the free tabloids and read the bits and pieces of so-called information given there. No one is reading a book – according to their own assertions, this would be a waste of time and give the impression that they had enough leisure time. Nobody would even think that playing Sudokus, or computer games, or chatting might be considered leisure play. For them, apparently, being occupied with their laptops or cell phones does not fall into this category. Thus, it might be true that:

The digital age society moves away from the book culture – and this trend has already caught up irrevocably, even with the socially privileged... Educationally disadvantaged middle classes are created, who – despite keeping a good life standard – no longer value classic education or find reading delightful (Gaschke 47, 2009, 19).

Children do recognize what is important to adults. According to the polls of “Reading Endowment” (Stiftung lesen), 25% of all adults do not read any books at all. It follows that the number of adults who labor systematically to arouse the interest of their children in books has fallen within ten years from 50 to 25 percent. Thus, it is not astonishing that the six- to thirteen-year-olds, state that they never read or do not like to read (ibid.). Children, even those of privileged middle class families, are rarely read to anymore: their interest in the world of literature is no longer kindled systematically. This affects their vocabulary, their ability to develop a sophisticated world-view, their way of comprehension – and finally, their success in school and in life.

Hart/Scott formulate this as follows:

By age three, children from privileged families have heard 30 million more words than children from underprivileged families. Longitudinal data on 42 families examined what accounted for enormous differences in rates of vocabulary growth. Children turned out to be like their parents in stature, activity level, vocabulary resources, and language and in-

teraction styles. Follow-up data indicated that the 3-year-old measures of accomplishment predicted third grade school achievement (2003, 4).

So far, families are defined as underprivileged by level of education, income and social standing. In many cases these families have equipped themselves with every piece of electronic entertainment. Meanwhile, this includes also families who were thought to be privileged – those who belong to the middle class and pass on traditional values to the next generation which might lead to distinguished careers. Even in these families electronic entertainment is also domineering. If it is used without any regard for the consequences, one must ask if this does not constitute a self-induced disadvantage, or rather, a disadvantage for their children. Books, encyclopedias and their use in a household are the best indicator for success in school. “Electronic” entertainment, however, has a negative impact on school success (Gaschke 2009, 47, 19).

Further changes: the effects on print media

It can be observed that not only reading competence and the social behavior of children have changed, but that hidden changes – regarding newspapers, for instance - have also taken place. According to the Basic Constitutional Law (of the Federal Republic of Germany, the press enjoys freedom; it is supposed to control the powerful and therefore, it must be well protected. But now it seems as if this freedom is in jeopardy. Even the largest newspaper publishers are complaining that they are financially ruined. They can no longer compete with the Internet. Daily newspapers are disappearing at an alarming rate, and if they continue their existence, editorial offices must be merged, or closed, or sold to subsidiaries where journalists have to work for low wages. Today, businesses are often requested to provide their own articles, if possible complete with sketches, tables, photos, but with concealed identity. Numerous newspapers now are publishing articles written by ordinary citizens who report about the daily life in their neighborhood. This does fill newspapers, but the contexts of these articles remain in the realm of privatization and are of non-political

nature. Investigative journalism – the traditional watchdog guarding against the political skirting of issues – is losing ground. It is too expensive (Blasberg/ Hamann 2009, 23).

More than forty years ago, Habermas wrote that a democracy cannot exist without the public; he means a public where newspaper journalists are exerting some control (1962, 263). To be able to fulfill this task, they must be independent and not rushed for time. It took months of research for the most important results of investigative journalism in Germany to become ready for publishing. Today, newspaper journalism is governed by the same laws as any other business. In addition, most readers possess only short attention spans any more, and either do not want to or are unable to read long, sophisticated articles. But what does this mean for the development of the political/democratic consciousness of the generation growing up today? Middleclass parents who do not read any more are no longer informed about the real background of a concealed political event. Therefore, they cannot form opinions and defend them in arguments. An opinion is defined by personal values. These values find their way into conversations and become apparent in every-day behavior, also toward the up-and-coming generation. If this generation is fed a steady diet of only short notes derived from tabloids or bits of Internet information here and there, the opportunity to raise a sophisticated new generation is lost. This endangers democracy.

Capabilities for the Society of the Future

Most if not all countries value flexibility, entrepreneurial spirit and personal responsibility. People are expected to not only possess innovation but also creativity, personal responsibility and motivation. The tasks of the future require people who are trained in dealing with antagonism in order to lead businesses; who know adversity – if not from their own experience, then from book knowledge (cf. Jansen 2009, 18).

In order to be prepared for tomorrow's world, children and youths need to become capable of solving complex mental tasks. For them, the OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (document OECD 35693281) has formulated key competences geared to-

wards developing cognitive, practical, and creative abilities. But they are also about attitudes, motivation and moral concepts.

The core of the key competences creates the ability to independent thinking as an expression of moral and intellectual maturity as well as accepting responsibility for one's own learning and actions (OECD, ibid.).

Reflexive thinking and acting are basic components of the competences:

Reflexivity requires relatively complex thinking and acting processes. It demands that the subject becomes the object of the thinking process. Reflexivity enables a person who has learned a certain technique to reflect on this technique after-wards, to relate it to other aspects of personal experience, and to change or adapt it. Reflexively thinking people trans-late these thinking processes into praxis or actions (OECD, ibid.).

Thus, reflexivity requires the application of metacognitive abilities (thinking about thinking), creativity, and a discerning attitude. This is not just about thinking itself but also about dealing with experiences that include thoughts, feelings, and personal attachments. It requires that the individuals attain a level of social maturity that enables them to remain free of social pressure, adopt various views, judge for themselves, and accept responsibility for their actions (OECD, ibid.).

In this regard, the OECD names as central abilities communication skills and reading competence. These deliberations suggest that reading competence is more important today than ever before. "In a society intent on knowledge, reading skills are a basic prerequisite for success in life" (cf.: Plettner, 2009, 18). It must be added: "... provided that they can communicate." Parents talk to their children and guide them in conversations and by their own example towards reading. Insofar, talking to each other precedes reading. The basics for communication skills are laid in the family and in play groups. There, children learn how to deal with different ways of thinking, enter into stable relationships, cooperate, and cope with conflicts (cf. Geissner, 2000). None of this can be learned by children

who are glued to their PCs for hours. This mental isolation promotes an un-social and un-political mindset, doesn't it?

The importance of acquiring sensible knowledge about dealing with electronic media - particularly with the Internet - should not be doubted in any way. It belongs to the inevitable competences in the age of globalization. But the

emphasis must be on "sensible" usage. This contradicts what a newspaper recently called "Le surf sur le web coupe les enfants de la réalité" (Surfing cuts children off from reality) (LAF 2010, 17). The reality must remain, and its pillars are communication skills and reading competence. To ensure their survival, this must be the foremost task of critical communication education.

References

- Ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de (2011)
- BLASBERG, A., HAMANN, G. 2009: Deutschland entblättert. In: *Die Zeit*, 49, 25-27
- DATTA, G. DUNDLACH, K. 2011: Die männliche Dominanz in den Medien. Nokturnal-times.wordpress.com/2011/02/10
- DOEBERT, M., NICKEL, S. 2000: Ursachenkomplex von Analphabetismus und Elternhaus, Schule und Erwachsenenalter. In: Doebert, M., Hubertus, P. (eds.): *Ihr Keuz ist die Schrift. Analphabetismus und Alphabetisierung in Deutschland*. Muenster/Stuttgart, 52f
- GASCHKE, S., 2009: Familie Powerpoint. In: *Die Zeit*, 47, 19
- GEISSNER, H. 2000/2007: *Kommunikationspaedagogik*, St. Ingbert
- GEISSNER, H. 2004: PISA fordert kommunikationspaedagogische Konsequenzen. In: Gutenberg, N. (ed.): *Sprechwissenschaft und Schule*. Muenchen/Basel 2004, 145-154
- HABERMAS, J., 1962: *Strukturwandel der Oeffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der buergerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuwied/Berlin (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*)
- HART, B., SCOTT, RISLEY, T. 2003: The early Catastrophe. The 30.000 000 Word Gap. In: *American Educator*, vol. 27, p. 4-9
- JANSEN, ST. 2009: In: Ein Land verlernt das Lesen. *Die Zeit*, 47, 17
- LAF 2010: Le surf sur le web coupe les enfants de la réalité. 20 minutes, 15.2.2010, 17
- LEHMANN, A. 2010: Kreativitaet und Entdeckerfreude foerdern. www.brandenburg.de/media/lbm1.a.1231.de/lehmann_kreativitaet_und_entdeckerfreude_foerdern.pdf (Zugriff: 11.4.10)
- LINN, S. 2004: www.CampaignforaCommercialFreeChildhood.org (Zugriff 15.10.2010)
- OECD 35693281 2005: Definition und Auswahl von Schluesselkompetenzen (German version)
- PISA 2000: Basiskompetenzen von Schuelern im internationalen Vergleich. Opladen 2001
- PISA 2004: Lernen fuer die Welt von morgen. OECD 2004
- PLETTNER, R. 2009: Ein Land verlernt das Lesen. In: *Die Zeit* 47, 17-18
- POSTMAN, N. 1993: *Das Verschwinden der Kindheit*. Frankfurt/M. (*The Disappearance of Childhood*, New York 1982)
- WIENHOLZ, M. 2010: www.schule-bw.de/unterricht/paedagogik/lesefoerderung/gender/computer (Zugriff 22.3.10)
- WINN, M. 1980: *Die Droge im Wohnzimmer*. Fuer die kindliche Psyche ist Fernsehen Gift. Und warum es nur ein Gegenmittel gibt: Abschalten! Reinbek (*The Plug-In Drug*, New York 1977)
- www.rp-online.de/beruf/arbeitswelt