

Toward media literacy or media addiction?

Contours of good governance for healthy childhood in the digital world

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Paula Bleckmann during her talk at the « Quality for Childhood » meeting in the European Parliament on September 6, 2016

Good governance and individual choice should be based on knowledge about the long-term balance of both digital risks and digital benefits.

A common goal of many if not all stakeholders involved in the debate on “education and well-being in the digital world” is that children should grow up to become healthy adults and mature and skilled users of technology. As adults, they should be able to assess and compare real-life and digital paths toward reaching a specific goal or satisfying a specific need. Last but not least, they should be able to decide and act in favour of the option that maximizes the long-term digital benefits and minimizes long-term digital risks. The idea that man should not become a “slave of technology” but rather learn to master technology and use it for his or her purposes in a limited, reflected, critical and technically skilled fashion, is common ground.



In contrast to this there's a heated debate and a lot of controversy on the paths toward this goal. Additionally another common goal is to reduce existing health and educational inequalities between different social groups.

Two "camps" with common goals and conflicting recommendations: Early High Touch vs. Early High Tech

In a previous QoC talk on 'the impact of screen media on children' (2010), Dr. Aric Sigman concludes, "...By ignoring the growing body of evidence linking screen time with child health we may ultimately be responsible for the greatest health scandal of our time."¹ Since 2010, the existing concerns have exacerbated and new problems connect with the use of digital media in children's lives have emerged since, such as Internet Gaming Disorder, excessive Smartphone use and Cyber Grooming.

"Health and Development Experts point out screen media risks and favour an 'Early High Touch Path'. They follow an internally consistent logic:

- Health and other risks of digital media are considerable.
- Children from disadvantaged family backgrounds are affected more severely, as their screen media use patterns in the home are more problematic (more availability of screens in children's bedrooms, longer usage times among children and parents, more exposure to problematic content).
- Educational institutions should reduce or level their use of digital media for younger children, and aim towards compensating the excessive use of media in children's families by offering opportunities for real life social and sensory experiences (High Touch).
- Parents should be empowered to lower availability of screen devices, reduce their children's screen time and resist marketing pressure.
- Training for early childhood professionals is needed to support this. It will help bridge the health divide.
- Fostering digital skills by using screen media in educational institutions should start around the end of primary school.
- This position is favored by the majority of public health and media addiction researchers, developmental psychologists, researchers in media effects studies as well as neuroscientists in a German expert survey (Bleckmann, 2014)."

Experts in the Early High Touch camp point at exceptions to the recommendation of a late onset of digital media use, such as the use of digital media for augmentative and alternative communication for children with special needs.



¹ Download the full text here: <http://www.ecswe.net/qoc-vol3/>

The theoretical grounding of the early High Touch camp...

is based on reasoning from neuroscience:

- Too little stimulation of the large variety of senses (exteroceptive, interoceptive and proprioceptive), too little sensorimotor integration is bad for the growth of the brain.
- Another concern is the dominance of bottom-up (“flight-and-fight-and-reward”) brain activity instead of the top-down (cognitive control, OFC activity). Others call this a corruption of the reward system.

It is also based on the results of media effects studies: Meta-analyses linking high screen time among children to a higher risk for obesity, sleep problems, inattention, loss of empathy, low academic achievement, Internet gaming disorder and other internet-associated addictive disorders. An overview of the literature shows that these effects are small to medium: they are more negative the younger the children are, the longer the usage times, the higher the use of age-inadequate content, more negative when no adult is present, more negative when recording long-term rather than short term effects on learning, far more negative when looking at the actual use patterns than in experimental studies with educational intent.

The problematic effects of caretakers’ use of screen media (background media exposition) on very young children are also increasingly being documented. These studies consistently show a decrease in the quality of caretaker-child-interaction (Radesky et al 2014).²

Digital Education experts point out screen media benefits and favour an “Early High Tech Path”

Digital education initiatives are mushrooming at regional, national and EU-wide level, e.g. the EU 'Opening up Education' - Making the 21th century classroom a reality” initiative. These “Early High Tech” initiatives follow the following internally consistent logic:

- Benefits of digital media for children are considerable.
- Educational institutions should be equipped with more screen media
- Early childhood professionals should be trained for implementing high tech projects with children, in order to make children digitally literate at an early age.
- Parents in general and especially parents from disadvantaged backgrounds are not well qualified for this task. Educational institutions need to help disadvantaged children to use media well, in an active and creative way, because in the home, they only get taught the passive or even addictive use. So this strategy will lead to benefits for physical, psychosocial and cognitive development and help bridge the digital divide.
- Parents and educational professionals should be made aware that many of them are digital immigrants who have difficulties understanding how beneficial screen media can be for the young children in their care. The potential is very high because of:
 - Individual learning
 - Cheap education (teachers are expensive compared to computers)
 - Gaming as playing
 - Immediate motivation/reward

Media education professionals and developers of software favor this position in the German expert survey.

² Radesky, Jenny S.; Kistin, Caroline J.; Zuckerman, Barry; Nitzberg, Katie; Gross, Jamie; Kaplan-Sanoff, Margot et al. (2014): Patterns of mobile device use by caregivers and children during meals in fast food restaurants. In: Pediatrics 133 (4), S. e843-9. DOI: 10.1542/peds.2013-3703.

Initiatives in the past and in the present – learning from the past

In contrast to the history of media education, the widespread introduction of today's high-tech tools is NOT preceded by extensive research. In the past, for school radio, school TV, language labs, programmed learning, to name a few examples, research investigating the risks and potential of new media for educational purposes was thoroughly researched in large controlled trials with alternative-treatment control groups. In the history of media education, we can describe a sequence of euphoria, stagnation and disillusionment. The hopes were that the new medium would help to teach children more individually, help the teachers have more time for individual students, that students would be more motivated and learn more. In the evaluation, this didn't turn out to be true. Let's take the language labs: The weak students had great difficulties learning with the technology, they lacked the will and skill to use the technology, the best students profited slightly, the educational divide widened. Language labs were found to be at best an addition to a good foreign language teacher for elder students and adult learners. (Hübner, 2005).³

For national and European research policy, it is essential to fund research to investigate the long-term effects of the "Early High Touch Path" vs. the "Early High Tech path" on digital risks and digital chances.

Age-dependent media education

I suggest this model that incorporates a lot of the lessons from the past and stresses the importance of two principles (Bleckmann 2012):⁴

- Analogue before digital, and
- active/creative before passive/receptive.

Examples of sustainable media maturity education

An educational practice that integrates the perspectives of prevention of problematic screen media use and the fostering of media literacy for young children would do five things:

- Protect small children from foreground and background screen media use, from problematic use in the time, the content and the functional dimensions.
- Create opportunities for real life sensorimotor experiences, for direct contact with other people, with nature, with the world around them
- Support children in coping with ('digesting') unhealthy media experiences in their homes
- Support parents in their struggle to do the first two things (reduce screen exposition so that it goes along well with the increasing psychosocial maturity of the child and support screen-free activities)
- Start a media education curriculum based on the two principles:
 - Analogue comes before virtual
 - Active/productive comes before passive/receptive.

Making a 'magic lantern' with young children would be a good example: it consists of a torchlight, a cardboard box, a lens, a wall to project the pictures onto, a slide or self-made small transparent picture. If you use a Smartphone to do a video project, the smartphone is a black box and the small child presses a button but has no chance to understand the process that is going on within the machine. The magic lantern or the 'thumb cinema', a picture or comic strip book project on the contrary are all examples of active/creative media education. It is surprising that these excellent ways of teaching IT relevant skills in the analogue world are not used more.

³ Hübner, E. (2005), *Anthropologische Medienerziehung*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang

⁴ Bleckmann, P. (2012) *Medienmündig. Wie unsere Kinder selbstbestimmt mit dem Bildschirm umgehen lernen*. [Media maturity – how our children can become self-determined screen media users] Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta

Steiner/Waldorf kindergartens and schools are, among other progressive educational forms, pioneers in sustainable digital education practice.

In addition there are overarching initiatives that are not limited to a certain pedagogical tradition such as:

- The publications of the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood among others the very well compiled brochure “Facing the screen dilemma” which is a great resource for early care and education professionals.⁵
- The Foundation “Stiftung Medien- und Onlinesucht” in Lüneburg, Germany, who have worked with hundreds of schools and kindergartens, with students, parents and teachers.
- And the MEDIA PROTECT initiative <http://www.hlca-consortium.de/en/media-protect/>, of which I am the co founder. As far as I know, we are the only primary prevention program for media addiction that is being evaluated in a controlled trial, or in other words the only kindergarten- and elementary school based program for the primary prevention of problematic screen media use. We are part of the Health Literacy in Childhood and Adolescence Consortium funded by the German ministry for research and education. Parents and teachers/education professionals are the main target group of the intervention

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she was invited by the Alliance for Childhood network group in Brussels to present some of her research on ‘Media protection’ on September 6th. The above text gives only a few excerpts of her very informative presentation. The full presentation will be in the 7th publication of the Quality of Childhood (QoC) book series <http://www.allianceforchildhood.eu/publications>.

(Prof. Paula Bleckmann will again speak about this topic at the [ELIANT’s](#) 10th Anniversary conference. See announcement in this newsletter).

⁵ PDF available here: <http://commercialfreechildhood.org/sites/default/files/facingthescreendilemma.pdf>