

Children's Media Lives: A Qualitative Study Year 2 Findings: Role of TV, Search Behaviours and Factors that Shape Trust

Aims

Ofcom's Children's Media Lives study was set up in 2014 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. It is a three-year study, tracking, as far as possible, the same 18 children, aged 8-15 in wave 1. The study provides an in-depth understanding of how this illustrative sample of children think about and use digital media, and how this differs and is influenced by age, life-stage, family circumstances, peers and wider society. This Research Highlight presents the results relating to the role of TV, search behaviours and factors that shape trust.

Key Findings

The role of TV

- **Children have a broad concept of 'watching TV' that includes many types of audio-visual content, viewed across multiple platforms and devices**

The children watched a broad range of content, from multiple sources and on a number of different devices – all of which they considered 'TV viewing'. This included YouTube content, as well as VoD from services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. The frequent use of these services and the popularity of YouTube partly shaped this broad definition of watching TV. TV-watching behaviour was driven overwhelmingly by content. The children had strong views about what they wanted to watch, and this was more important than viewing on a particular device. However, when content was available on multiple devices children often preferred to view on a large screen, generally the main TV set.

- **Video on demand (VoD) and catch-up dominates children's TV viewing**

The children consumed VoD and catch-up services in much greater volumes than live programming. These services were regularly accessed through the TV set, as well as through other devices. Family viewing increasingly involved VoD and catch-up. The younger children (8-11) generally had access to the smallest range of devices and tended to share devices with siblings, so were more likely to watch the TV set. Although much of this viewing was VoD and catch-up, the younger children were also more likely watch live broadcast TV after school, particularly if they had younger siblings.

Search behaviours

- **Children's approach to search is influenced by the type of information they are looking for, and their personal preferences**

While many of the children used traditional Google search, this was not the default for all children or for all searches. Other methods included YouTube, Google image searches and Siri. Searching for audio-visual content tended to drive children towards services like YouTube or Google image search, while searching for text tended to lead to traditional Google search or Wikipedia. Some children chose visual

rather than text approaches because of a preference for seeing information in this way, or because of learning difficulties or dyslexia which made reading text difficult.

- **Children often assume that the first unsponsored result on search engines is the best**

When using search engines, children often assumed the first link on the search results would provide them with the best information, but often couldn't clearly articulate why. Most, although not all, recognised the 'ad' symbol and so tended to use the first unsponsored search engine result.

Factors that shape trust

- **Children have their own signifiers to identify whether websites are trustworthy**

The children used many 'signs' that a site was trustworthy, including: Sites they considered well or professionally designed; sites of brands they knew; sites with adverts for brands they knew; the kind of adverts displayed (banner advertising was seen as more trustworthy than pop-ups); and sites that they, or people they knew, had used before. Despite being aware of the importance of using trustworthy sites, many ignored these strategies if a site's content was sufficiently desirable.

- **Children struggle to identify user-generated content**

Most of the children understood that not all editable or user-generated content is trustworthy. However, few could reliably identify it on websites other than Wikipedia and YouTube. Unless it was clear that the content could be edited, they tended to trust most sites, regardless of the source or author. YouTube was typically trusted more than Wikipedia, as some children felt video content was more 'transparent' and self-evidently 'true' than text, although Wikipedia was still widely used.

Policy context

The Children's Media Lives research project enhances the substantive body of quantitative research Ofcom conducts into the trends in the media usage patterns of children and young people. This research helps policymakers understand how children are using and engaging with media, and to identify which elements of media literacy to develop and promote.

Methodology

Researchers spent 3-4 hours with each child and young person in their home, interviewing and learning about their behaviours, attitudes and understanding of digital media. The interviews were based on a topic guide, but the child determined the general flow of the conversations. Stimulus material was used to prompt discussion in areas of the topic guide that were less top-of-mind for children, such as the role of online advertising. The ethnographic interviews were supplemented with short interviews with parents and siblings to better understand the household dynamics and access to digital media.

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