HANDBOOKS IN COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA

The Handbook of **Children, Media, and Development**

Edited by Sandra L. Calvert and Barbara J. Wilson

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (hardback, 2008)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The handbook of children, media, and development / edited by Sandra L. Calvert & Barbara J. Wilson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-4417-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-4443-3694-8 (pbk : alk. paper) 1. Mass media and children. 2. Child development. 3. Children's mass media. I. Calvert, Sandra L. II. Wilson, Barbara J.

HQ784.M3H26 2008
302.23083—dc22

2008009039

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Galliard by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong.
Printed and bound in Malaysia by Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd

01 2011

Dedicated to
Cheryl, Lee, and Mary Ann
and
John, Bob, and Joan

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Foreword

Aletha C. Huston

Over the past 100 years, as Ellen Wartella and Michael Robb point out in this volume, scholars and social pundits have reacted to every new set of media with a mixture of panic and optimism about potential influences on children. Radio and film each generated some research and social commentary, but the advent of television in the 1950s ushered in a new level of media pervasiveness in children's lives and the first wave of solid, theoretically-based research on the topic. In the 1960s through the 1980s, psychologists and communication scholars forged a field that spanned disciplines as they examined the effects of both the formal features and content of the media that children were using several hours a day. In the last 15 or 20 years, media forms have proliferated, with new technologies transforming how children and adolescents use media as well as blurring the old distinctions among telephones, computers, television sets, radio, and records.

The chapters in this volume represent the state-of-the-art knowledge about young people's media use and the roles that media play in their lives. Despite the dramatic technological changes of the last several years, many of themes are familiar from earlier work. One of the fundamental tensions throughout the years has been form versus content. Some theorists have emphasized the importance of the qualities of the medium itself (e.g., visual versus auditory, interactive versus unidirectional); others have argued that content messages have similar effects across different forms of presentation. These questions about form and content remain central to the research presented in this book.

Many content issues are perennial and familiar, including the effects of violence, sexually explicit material, social stereotypes, and advertising on aggression, fear, imagination, and beliefs about the social world. The potential for positive effects of prosocial and educational content continues to be supported by evidence as well. Health concerns have increased considerably, as indicated by a whole section devoted to research on health effects, much of which is inspired by the obesity epidemic and societal awareness of the role of social influences on young people's health behavior. Chapters on attention and learning, cognitive processing of media

symbol systems, and learning from educational media have ancestors in earlier media research. In each case, the new work described here has advanced our understanding of the processes and issues involved, but the continuity with the past is nonetheless striking. These topics represent important, fundamental questions that form the core of efforts to understand young people's uses of media and the ways in which their thinking, behavior, and lives are influenced by those media.

In the past several years, media forms have expanded, proliferated, and morphed at a startling rate, opening up new uses and functions. Some of the most striking changes are the increase in user agency and control and the increasing opportunity for interactivity. Media devices are now small and portable, making them available for filling time while waiting in line, traveling from place to place, or just sitting. When television was the dominant entertainment medium, the viewer was exposed to a world "out there," whether it was fictional stories or real-life events. These functions have not disappeared, as evidenced by young people's devotion to favorite comedy and drama series, but the newer media offer opportunities for developing and expanding one's own internal identities and thoughts, interacting with individual friends or family, and interacting with groups in cyberspace. The chapter on parasocial and online relationships presents what we have learned about these functions. The Internet, cell phones, and text messaging have become integral parts of young people's social interactions, and we are just beginning to understand how such mediated relationships may or may not be similar to face-to-face interactions. The first wave of social commentary about these new media functions was predictable – fears about children being exposed to predators or exploitation through the Internet along with optimism about children being able to find compatible friends and activities across cyberspace, but the chapters in this book indicate that research has begun to move beyond such simplistic formulations.

Media studies of children have always straddled the boundaries between basic research on developmental processes on the one hand and policy and practice on the other. Many of the policy and practice issues have remained stubbornly similar over the years, in part because media are big business, particularly in the United States. The chapter on business models goes beyond the "bad" business image to consider a variety of modes for producing and distributing children's media. Several chapters on policy and interventions, however, remind us of some intractable issues, both old and new. It has long been clear that government regulation can play a minor role at best in protecting children from inappropriate content. Government has more potential to promote high-quality positive media content through requirements imposed on broadcasters (e.g., the Educational Children's Television Act) and through funding production, though neither of these options is used extensively in the United States, largely because of the absence of political will to do so.

Educating viewers in media literacy and related skills is one solution outside government, but our overall progress in maximizing the positive and minimizing the negative effects of media is discouraging. The reasons are undoubtedly