

KELLY JAUNZEMS

Edith Cowan University

LELIA GREEN

Edith Cowan University

DONELL HOLLOWAY

Edith Cowan University

KYLIE STEVENSON

Edith Cowan University

Very Young Children Online: Media discourse and parental practice

ABSTRACT

In 2014, the Australian Research Council awarded funding for a Discovery Project exploring the risks and benefits 0-5s face online. One element of this research was to investigate public discourses around very young children's (0-5) use of touchscreen technologies. Based on analysis of data collected from the public sphere and popular media over a twelve-month period (April 2015 to March 2016), the authors find that Australian parents still express confusion and guilt concerning their very young children's media use. Many news, magazine and blogger commentaries collected were alarmist in tone and did not resonate with parents' experiences of everyday digital life with very young children. Instead of accepting dominant discourses around zero to very little digital time for under-5s, parents are sharing and developing their practices that work for them, but this does not stop them feeling techno-guilt.

KEYWORDS

touch screens
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many children born in the past six years have, from a very early age, had access to the intuitive interfaces of touch screen devices such as the iPad (released in 2010). This touch-and-swipe technology can be used in a self-directed manner and at a much younger age than previous point and click, mouse and keyboard, technology allowed. Despite the increasing popularity of touchscreen devices, there is limited general knowledge about the benefits,

risks, opportunities and challenges associated with very young children's use of these technologies. Prior to 2016, most of the academic research available reflected educational perspectives (for example, Danby;¹ Dezuanni et al.;² and Neumann³), rather than investigating everyday family practices as favoured by media and communications studies. One indication of this lack of media studies information was the increasing take-up of the Holloway et al.⁴ report sponsored by EU Kids Online that had been downloaded 29,752 times as at 13 October 2017 including, for example, over 900 downloads in a month as late as November 2015. Reflecting this unmet demand for media and communications-driven knowledge about very young children's touchscreen use, the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded *Toddlers and Tablets: Exploring the risks and benefits 0-5s face online* (2015-17). This ARC research includes a sub-project examining the discursive constructions of very young children's touchscreen use circulating in the public sphere, as well as ethnographic work with 12 Australian families, and 6 in the UK. This paper focuses on media discourses in the public sphere: other papers (Holloway et al.,⁵ plus two in review) more centrally reference the ethnographic research.

This paper explores the culturally contested space within which very young children develop digital literacies. A range of influential voices, including the American Academy of Pediatrics,⁶ have until recently argued that there is no safe level of digital media consumption for under-2s, and that 3-5s should have very limited exposure.⁷ This restrictive expert advice contrasts with parents' everyday perspectives and practices. Many parents believe that exposure to digital media is vital to their child's development, hoping to support their child's acquisition of the digital skills required to succeed in today's world. Consequently, children's use of digital technologies has become an area where parents risk feeling techno-guilt. The resulting tensions are being played out in the public sphere through parenting blogs, discussion groups and online media. This paper addresses a research gap by examining that content.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The conceptual framework used for this paper combines social constructionism⁸ with a co-creation of knowledge⁹ /social learning¹⁰ approach, which has links with the 'communities of practice' literature.¹¹ Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of relevant blogs, articles, parenting sites and news media concerning very young children's use of touchscreen technology, the authors investigate a range of influences that inform parents' views in this

area. Based on Fairclough and Wodak,¹² CDA deems discourse ‘a form of social practice’ that takes into account the context within which a discourse is produced, distributed and interpreted, as well as its cultural implications.¹³ Discursive constructions of very young children’s touchscreen use shape parents’ shared understandings about the benefits and risks of 0-5s’ digital behaviours.

Working within this context, the research team collected and analysed commentary available in the public sphere from 1 April 2015-31 March 2016 to explore popular and contested understandings with regards to 0-5s online. The sample selected was drawn from everyday discussion and commentary within the Australian and New Zealand mediasphere, including popular parenting blogs such as *Mamamia* and *kidspot.com*. This data has been interrogated using textual¹⁴ and content¹⁵ analysis to identify the attitudes, rationales and strategies that parents and others claim should influence adults when deciding whether, and in which circumstances, to allow very young children online. Such discussion also addresses the digital activities and content suitable for very young children. A keyword search strategy was used comprising 11 children-related identifiers, and 11 technological terms, with all 22 search criteria related to touchscreen technology in any and all possible combinations. Of the 85 newspaper, magazine and blog articles identified, collected and analysed, 35 (41%) focussed solely on the risks associated with young children’s screen time, while only 9 (11%) concentrated on the potential benefits afforded to young children.

SPECIALIST COMMENTARY WITHIN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

As noted previously, the old guidelines developed by the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2011¹⁶ are widely cited by both experts and parents. Examples of advice from newspapers, magazines and blogs that echo these perspectives include: ‘Paediatricians recommend children over 2 have no more than 2 hours of screen time (including television, computers and all other digital devices [...], while] children under 2 don’t need any screen time’ (blog).¹⁷

Recent updates to the AAP recommendations fit a little better with contemporary family life. These are that children under 2 years should avoid screen use altogether, apart from video chatting apps such as FaceTime; and, children between 18 months and two years may be introduced to digital media alongside their parents in short episodes. For children aged between two and five years, the AAP recommends no more than 1 hour per day of screen time¹⁸, with a leading American paediatrician arguing that: ‘The impact these mobile

devices are having on the development and behaviour of children is still relatively unknown' (newspaper).¹⁹

Part of the anxiety around these issues stems from the lack of social and cultural experience of 0-5s' digital engagement. It is only since 2010 or so, with the adoption of smartphones and iPads, that very young children have enjoyed immediacy of online access in self-directed ways. Parents have had to use their best judgement with regard to the guidelines from the AAP. Emerging evidence-based guidelines however, suggest that there is no 'one-size-fits-all approach – parents should adjust their strategies to the age, interests and needs of their children' (academic)²⁰. These guidelines encourage parents to view digital technologies as a resource for children, and suggest that parents who take a restrictive approach, whilst avoiding short-term risks, may also limit the opportunities that their children may enjoy.

Drowning out this nuanced advice is a raft of well-publicised celebrity discourse. Megan Fox,²¹ for example, condemns young children's use of technology:

...parents are making a huge mistake by using gadgets as electronic "babysitters" for their kids. 'It's actually really bad for their brain development and I'm trying to breed, like, superheroes,' she added to People magazine. 'I don't want them to get f**ked-up brains'. (Megan Fox, cited in blog)

Jamie Oliver is also on the record as strictly limiting screen time for his children²², while Jennifer Lopez²³ restricts her children's digital exposure to one day per week:

... "Sunday Funday", in which her kids can use tablets and play video games just one day a week. 'All they want to do is be on these devices all the time. They get to play with it as much as they want that day,' she told E! News. 'I try to regulate it and then on Sunday, I let them go and I take a nap while they're doing it'. (Lopez, cited in blog)

Hugh Jackman has said that he limits screen time to the weekend²⁴, whilst David Beckham restricts his kids' online activities. 'No more than an hour,' he says. 'I know that sounds pretty harsh, but I want my boys to be outside playing' (blog).²⁵ Although celebrity comment is prominent in the public sphere, few parents feel that these celebrities provide realistic models for their own lives.²⁶

'Let your kids climb trees. Take the device out of their hand. Play Monopoly!' Winslet says. 'You go to a cafe and grown-ups are at one end of the table and children the other, on devices, not looking up. It takes every member of a family to be a member, and there are too many interruptions these days – and devices

are a huge interruption.’...But we are not all millionaire movie stars, with flexible hours and unlimited dollars for nannies to entertain kids while we work. (Fiona Sugden, *Mamamia* blogger)

Parental defensiveness is a constant trope of these discourses, but parents resent what they see as unrealistic guidelines divorced from everyday life.

IMPACT UPON PARENTS OF RELEVANT PUBLIC SPHERE DISCOURSES

The warnings about young children using digital technologies echo those of the 50 years ago when parents worried that their children’s television viewing would cause ‘square eyes’, and that violence on television might make their children aggressive.²⁷ Such concerns have historically been linked with the introduction of any new communication technology²⁸ and have been termed ‘media panics’. Today’s fears around young children’s touchscreen use include concerns around ‘a child’s development, wellbeing, physical health, sleep, emotional intelligence and academic achievement’ (newspaper),²⁹ ‘musculoskeletal disorders’ (newspaper),³⁰ ‘language, cognitive and social skills’ (newspaper),³¹ ‘weakened core muscles, bad posture, unfit, obesity, junk food and mindless eating’ (newspaper).³² Some warnings are even harsher however: ‘Giving babies an iPad to play with is tantamount to child abuse – the equivalent of playing “Russian roulette” with their development’ (blog).³³ Statements such as these, augmented by celebrity commentary, are associated with a rise in parental ‘techno-guilt’; ‘guilt is always there because you question yourself and worry that you are doing the wrong thing’ (parent, cited in newspaper).³⁴ Another mother also echoes this: ‘I worry about the comments suggesting – with varying degrees of politeness – that devices and apps are sending our children to illiteracy hell in a digital handcart. What if those people are right?’ (newspaper).³⁵

Even while arguing that experts and celebrities should ‘stop telling us parents we are doing the wrong thing. We have enough to worry about’ (blog),³⁶ parents fail to feel confident about their chosen position. For example this mother strongly believes her child will grow up in a technology-dependent world but is constantly fearful that she may be doing the wrong thing.³⁷

My daughter’s world will be very different to the one I grew up in. The way she will learn, read and interact with her peers will be done through a technology that wasn’t available when I was a baby or in school. Instead of fearing technology, I choose to embrace it. I choose to expose my daughter to it from as early as possible, so that when she grows up and is surrounded by it, it isn’t

unfamiliar. I want her to embrace the possibilities the future has, not fear them [...] But sometimes I worry. I worry that I am somehow failing her by exposing her to technology. I worry because of experts who tell parents like me that we are messing up our children. Destroying their future. (Avi Vince, blog)

Headlines such as *Giving iPads to babies is child abuse, says doctor*,³⁸ and *Experts warn giving your child an iPad to calm a tantrum stunts their development*,³⁹ sensationalise the issue and cause parents to feel anxious and shameful: ‘it is not good for anyone’s wellbeing to be constantly feeling like they’re judged or putting all that effort into judging others’ (blog).⁴⁰

There is a significant disconnect between much expert advice and the opinions expressed by, and practices of, many everyday parents and care-givers. Arguably, in the absence of credible guidance on very young children’s engagement, parents have developed their own expertise based on the evidence of daily life and their personal ideas about the benefits, opportunities, risks and challenges of such technology.

PARENTS’ EVERYDAY PRACTICES AND CHILDREN’S EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

The project’s parallel ethnographic research demonstrates that parents have general rules around time limits, use and content.⁴¹ Very young children tend to use ‘family owned’ technology rather a device of their own. This generally results in lending technology to young children and short-term use, rather than long, uninterrupted periods of screen time. Young children also tend to use devices when adults are around,⁴² encouraging co-present use.

Many parents use the respite of allowing children a short burst of digital access to get things done. Looking back, one mum says: ‘I could hand her my phone so she could soak up the dulcet tones of Peppa Pig and I could get the toilet roll, two-minute noodles and tomato sauce without having to listen to yet [sic] another tantrum’ (blog).⁴³ Another says she gave her son the iPad ‘when he needed quiet time or when she needed to get something done like cook dinner’.⁴⁴ A third mother describes using her phone as a distraction for her child whilst undergoing a medical procedure: ‘Without even thinking about it, I pulled out my phone and handed it to my three-year-old to make him happy while that happened’ (blog).⁴⁵

Advocates of young children’s use of touchscreens, including neuroscientist Dr Muireann Irish, draw attention to the skills and competencies to be developed: ‘rather than looking at screen time damaging their brain, we should focus on the incredible capacity a child has to look at the world’ (newspaper).⁴⁶ That fits in with parents’ views about possible

benefits. Parents are generally quick to say that they tend to buy educational apps, such as those which help with maths, reading, writing and speaking skills, rather than buying games that encourage ‘passive viewing of, say, cartoons on a screen’ (newspaper).⁴⁷ Skype or video chat is a further way in which children use digital technology. Used to keep in touch with parents who work away, or with distant relatives, these interactions help young children form and maintain familial relationships. One parent, who says they generally discourage screen time adds: ‘the only exception is when we are Skyping home to Ireland—I view that differently’ (newspaper).⁴⁸

Recent research suggests that children are able to seamlessly transfer not only this imaginative play, but also the skills learnt on a device, to real life: ‘for example, if a child can play a game of chess or complete puzzles on a device, they can simply transfer those skills to the 3D object’ (newspaper).⁴⁹ Devices can also be used as a catalyst for physical play. Known as hybrid play, apps and videos can stimulate a child’s imagination and encourage active play with toys, situations or characters. The ABC⁵⁰ has capitalised on this:

We find that when kids really love something, they and their parents really want to extend the experience from the screen. They want to be those characters. So it’s an important part of our preschool (program development), that we extend that experience with books, with apparel, with toys, and extend their relationship with it. (Claire Rigden, newspaper)

The use of digital devices by young and very young children is common practice in Australian families and, while some experts and celebrities continue to advocate against any screen time, parents are becoming more optimistic about promoting an integrated approach. ‘Even though I’m fully supportive of introducing technology to children’, says one, ‘I am a full advocate for kids experiencing all aspects of life including playing outdoors and with traditional toys too’ (blog).⁵¹ One father, who is also an app developer, notes that parents model their personal technology habits in their daily lives: ‘the challenge for parents is to understand the benefits and pitfalls of technology and to help their children create balance’ (newspaper).⁵²

CONCLUSION

The mediasphere message to parents is transitioning from being overwhelmingly negative to a more nuanced appreciation of integrated, context-specific, digital activities. Even so, the gist of the outdated AAP guidelines from 2011 remain cited by experts. The public sphere

also uses contentious quotes from celebrities to heighten the emotional debate around young children's use of touch screen technologies. This expert/celebrity critique of 0-5s online can promote a sense of techno-guilt in parents, who have the potential to be their own harshest critics. Although they have nuanced views on this issue, parents worry that they may be guilty as charged: sub-contracting their responsibilities and using touchscreen technology as a digital child-minder. A historical perspective identifies the operation of a media panic around new technologies, with the same messages used 50 years ago with respect to television.

Digital technologies are likely to be a central part of the life of any infant born today. A parents' best bet, as most of them argue in discussions with each other, is to integrate this technology as part of a balanced lifestyle, and as one way to connect, entertain, facilitate and organise the family. Until the public sphere concentrates as much on benefits, opportunities and balance as it does on risk, and in the absence of guidelines that make sense to them, however, parents will continue to be defensive and feel guilty.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kelly Jaunzems

Kelly Jaunzems is a PhD candidate student in Edith Cowan's School of Arts and Humanities. She also works as a research assistant to Professor Lelia Green and Dr Donell Holloway on the Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project "Toddlers and Tablets: Exploring the risks and benefits 0-5s face online". Although the lion's share of this study involves interviews, detailed ethnographies and video recordings, also involving Kelly, the collection and analysis of media messages makes an important contribution to the overall investigation. The work underpinning this paper formed a major part of Kelly's research responsibilities (under supervision) in the 2016-17 period.

Lelia Green is Professor of Communications in the School of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia, and was a foundation Chief Investigator with the Australian Research Council (ARC) Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation. Lelia works within the disciplinary fields of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, and is a past president of the Australian and New Zealand Communications Association (ANZCA). Lelia is the first Chief Investigator on a number of nationally competitive ARC grants.

Donell Holloway is an ARC Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) Fellow based at ECU. As an experienced ethnographer, she has carried out qualitative research in diverse settings. This includes families and their Internet use and children and their Internet use. She has authored or co-authored over 50 refereed journal articles, book chapters and conference papers.

Kylie Stevenson is researcher at ECU where she is engaged in a number of research projects, including the ARC *Hand Up* Linkage project with the St Vincent de Paul Society of Western Australia, and the ARC Discovery project *Toddlers and Tablets* about how children aged 0–5 use touchscreen technology. In addition, Kylie has completed doctoral research on a project of her own design 'Creative River Journeys', case studies of creative arts researchers at ECU.

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