

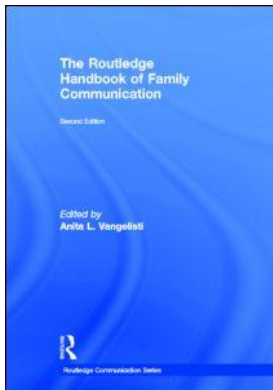
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The Media and Family Communication

Barbara J. Wilson and Kristin L. Drogos

Communication technologies permeate the homes of American families today. The average child lives in a household with four television sets, two radios, three DVD or VCR players, two CD players, two video game consoles, and two computers (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Moreover, children spend over seven and a half hours each day using these media (Rideout et al., 2010). In many American homes, the television occupies a central space in the main gathering area, often accompanied by a surround-sound system and other technologies to heighten the quality and realism of the viewing experience.

Given their prominence, the media are clearly an integral part of the daily routines of family life. Families eat meals around the television set, parents read the newspaper comics to young children, and siblings gather together to watch a rented movie on a DVD player. But the media can be used to avoid family interactions as well. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between media technologies and family communication. To illustrate how multi-faceted this relationship is, consider the following example of a six-year-old girl entering her parents' bedroom one morning before school.

“Mom, what happened to his face?” the girl asked, looking at a close-up on the television screen of a young man being interviewed on *The Today Show*.

“He got burned, honey. He got too close to fire and it burned his body. That’s why we always tell you to be careful because fire is dangerous,” her mother replied.

“But Mom, why is he crying?”

“Well, he’s sad because he is hurt pretty badly but he’s also happy because he survived. Now, that’s enough, this is the news and it’s not really a kid’s show,” her mother said as she turned the TV off.

At dinner that evening, the 6-year-old returned to the topic even though the TV was not on at the time: “Mom, Dad, I know what you’re supposed to do if you are ever in a fire. You’re supposed to STOP, DROP, and ROLL,” she proclaimed as she fell on the floor, demonstrating the moves. “Right?”

Obviously, the media triggered this parent–child interaction, which evolved into a larger discussion of fire safety, emotional responses to tragedy, and even coping. Yet the example also illustrates how families influence individual media experiences. In this case, the mother curtailed her child’s exposure to the story by turning the TV off and by holding back the fact that the injured man had been involved in a terrorist attack in Pakistan. The mother also used this instance to establish control over the medium and to help define news as a particular genre of programming. The fact that the conversation continued later that day illustrates the widespread influence of the media beyond particular moments of exposure.

This chapter will explore how the media are intricately connected to the family, serving as a stimulant, backdrop, and negotiated space for the dynamics of daily interaction. To set the stage, the first section of the chapter will describe how families use the media. Families differ in how much time they spend with different technologies and where media are placed within the household. The second section will explore the impact of the media on family life and, in particular, family communication. In addition to shaping our expectations about family roles and relationships, the media can directly stimulate family interaction, as in the example above. Alternatively, the media can hinder interaction and cause conflict.

The third section of the chapter will turn the relationship around and explore the ways in which family communication can moderate and influence media experiences. Families differ in their communication styles, which can affect media habits. In addition, some parents actively engage in mediation strategies to enhance children’s learning from the media and to prevent harmful effects of exposure to certain types of content. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the role of the media within the family system and with suggestions for future research.

A point about scope is in order. Chapter 27 of this volume deals with the use of digital media in the family, so the present chapter will concentrate mostly on traditional media, such as television, film, radio, and print. However, we do overview emerging research on newer media in the relevant sections on family communication. Admittedly, distinctions between traditional and new media are somewhat artificial as many of these technologies are converging. Instead of going to a theater, families can now order a movie on demand using their home digital cable system. Alternatively, they can watch movies and even TV programs online. The development of digital media is producing a high degree of interactivity and integration across different forms of media.

Family Use of Mass Media

Ownership

Nearly all households (98 percent) in the U.S.A. have a television set and a large majority (88 percent) have a DVD player (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). Cable television is also commonplace, with 84 percent of households with children subscribing to some type of extra service (Rideout et al., 2010). In fact, almost half (46 percent) of American families own four technologies that are described as “media staples” in the home: a television set, a recording device, video game equipment, and a computer (Woodard & Gridina, 2000).

Though most children grow up today in multimedia households, ownership of certain technologies varies by family income and parental education. For instance, higher income families are more likely to have Internet access in the home (Rideout et al., 2010). In addition, children whose parents are college-educated are more likely to have

home access to the Internet than are children whose parents do not have a college degree (Rideout et al., 2010).

One consequence of the proliferation of newer technologies is the migration of older equipment to children's bedrooms. Indeed, almost three-quarters (71 percent) of American children between the ages of 8 and 18 have a television set in their bedroom and over half (57 percent) have a VCR or DVD player (Rideout et al., 2010). In addition, almost half (49 percent) of children have cable access in their rooms. Such personal availability increases with age, such that 71 percent of children over the age of eight have a TV set in their room. Somewhat surprisingly, income does not necessarily provide children with greater private access to the media. In fact, children in higher income homes are *less* likely to have a TV in their room than are children in lower income families (Roberts et al., 1999). Parental education is also negatively related to placing a TV in a child's bedroom (Gentile & Walsh, 2002).

Children not only have media in their bedroom, but they also increasingly have access to mobile media that allow them to be in front of a screen at any time and in any place. In a recent national survey, 76 percent of American children between the ages 8 and 18 reported having their own iPod or MP3 player (Rideout et al., 2010). Furthermore, two-thirds (66 percent) had their own cell phone and nearly a third (29 percent) had their own laptop. Ownership of technology increases with age; in 2009, 75 percent of American teens had a cell phone compared to only 30 percent of 8- to 10-year-olds (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010).

Obviously, children who have their own media devices, whether portable or in the bedroom, are less likely to be supervised by their parents. In addition, as children spend time alone watching movies, listening to music, and in many cases surfing the Internet, they have fewer opportunities to engage in social interaction and family activities. This issue will be discussed below in the section on TV centrality.

Time Spent with Media

Given all this technology, how much actual time do families devote to the media? The average American child (8 to 18 years of age) spends over seven hours each day with some form of mediated communication (Rideout et al., 2010). Nearly four and a half hours of this time is devoted to watching television, which continues to monopolize children's media profiles. But children are not the only members of the family who watch a lot of TV. Televisions are turned on for at least eight hours a day in the typical U.S. household (Nielsen Media Research, 2007). It is not surprising, then, that television has been referred to as another member of the family (Gunter & Svennevig, 1987).

Even very young children spend a fair amount of time with television. According to recent national statistics, nearly half (43 percent) of babies between the ages of 6 months and 23 months watch television daily (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Moreover, despite the fact that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages media exposure for children under the age of two (AAP, 2011), American babies in this age range watch an average of one to two hours of TV per day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Even more surprising, over one-third (36 percent) of children under six years have a TV set in their bedroom (Rideout & Hamel, 2006).

In contrast to television, children and teens spend an hour and a half each day with computers (Rideout et al., 2010). This figure undoubtedly will rise as young people increasingly acquire laptops and other portable devices with Internet access and as more

television content moves online. Nevertheless, despite all the newer technologies, television still dominates most families' media experiences (Robinson, Kestnbaum, & Kohut, 2000). In accord, much of the research on media and families has focused on television over other technologies, as we shall see throughout this chapter. The next two sections explore how central television is in some homes and what families do while watching TV.

TV Centrality in the Household

When television was first introduced in the 1950s, families organized their homes around this new medium (Andreasen, 2001). The television set was considered a decorative piece of furniture that occupied a regal space in the living room. In the 1960s and 1970s, television moved to the family room but was still considered the center of household activity. As the technology improved, families purchased additional sets so that today, 83 percent of American households own multiple TV sets (Nielsen Media Research, 2009). The growing number of private viewing spaces now found in bedrooms and basements means that children often watch television alone or with siblings and friends (Roberts et al., 1999).

However, the trend toward privatization has been curtailed somewhat by recent architectural changes in the home. Beginning in the 1990s, new housing has tended to feature more open floor plans with cathedral ceilings and a "great room" for joint activities. The advent of the home theater system allows families to recreate the "electronic hearth" (Andreasen, 2001), this time with large-screen TVs, high-definition resolution, DVD equipment, and surround sound systems.

Nevertheless, not all families orient themselves around the media. Comstock and Paik (1991) coined the term "household centrality" to refer to how central or pervasive television is in the home. According to these scholars, high centrality refers to families that watch a great deal of television and have very few rules governing the use of TV by children. In a recent national study of over 3,000 children, 45 percent reported that the TV is turned on "most of the time" in their house, even if no one is watching it (Rideout et al., 2010). Moreover, 64 percent said television is usually on during mealtimes. Thus, for many families television is a constant backdrop to most activities.

As it turns out, centrality of television is related to socioeconomic status. Parents with less income and less education are more likely themselves to watch TV, less likely to have rules about television, and more likely to allow children to have a TV in their bedroom (Rideout et al., 2010). Television is also more central in African American families than in Caucasian families, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Rideout et al., 2010). For example, African American children live in households with more TV sets, spend more time watching TV, are more likely to have a television set in their bedroom, and are more likely to eat meals with the TV on.

Centrality of television also varies by family composition. Compared to two-parent families, children in single-parent homes spend more time watching TV, are more likely to eat meals with the TV on, are more likely to have a TV in the bedroom, and are less likely to have rules regarding television use (Woodard & Gridina, 2000). These patterns suggest that in homes with less parental assistance, television gets used more for babysitting and for companionship.

Media and Other Activities

Children as well as adults rarely pay full attention to the television when it is on (Schmitt, Anderson, & Collins, 1999). Viewers get distracted, engage in conversation, and multi-task.

In one national survey, four in ten (40 percent) children reported doing “something else” while watching TV, including using other media (Roberts et al., 2005). In another study, video cameras were installed in the homes of 106 families to observe viewing behaviors over a ten-day period (Schmitt, Woolf, & Anderson, 2003). The researchers found that 46 percent of all viewing time was spent engaged in some additional activity. Social interaction was the most common concurrent activity for all ages, dispelling the myth that television prevents families from having conversation. Children most often talked with siblings, though when they conversed with an adult it was more often the mother than the father. Among children, playing and eating were the next most common activities. For adults, reading and doing chores were the next most common, with women more likely than men to do household duties while viewing. The researchers also observed a fair amount of cuddling while viewing, especially between parents and young children.

Nevertheless, TV can hamper interaction, especially during meals. Martini (1996) video-taped 59 Japanese American and Caucasian families while they ate dinner. Nearly half of the Japanese American families regularly had the TV set turned on during the evening meal. When the TV was on, family members often sat facing the set rather than each other, and they also moved about the room quite often during the meal. Furthermore, these families generally conversed less often than did Caucasian families, most of whom did not have the TV on during dinner. The nature of the talk differed too. Japanese American families talked more about television and about activities they were doing while they ate, whereas Caucasian families talked more about events that had occurred during the day, emotions they were experiencing, and abstract topics involving the physical and social world.

Having the television on during meal times not only constrains talk, but also has health implications. Children are less likely to consume healthy foods and more likely to consume snacks while watching television compared to doing other activities (Matheson, Killen, Wang, Varady, & Robinson, 2004). These patterns are exacerbated when families watch television during mealtimes (Coon, Goldberg, Rogers, & Tucker, 2001). Moreover, a longitudinal study found that children who watched more TV during kindergarten and first grade and who ate fewer meals with their family were significantly more likely to be overweight in the third grade, even after controlling for sex, race, and family socioeconomic status (Gable, Chang, & Krull, 2007).

Clearly, American families today spend a great deal of time with the media, especially television. Adults and children negotiate how central television is in daily life, where to locate the technology in the home, and how to integrate television and other media with household activities like eating meals. Terms such as “electronic hearth” and “electronic babysitter” reveal just how pivotal television is in family life. The next section explores the impact of the media on family life.

The Impact of the Media on Family Communication

The sheer amount of time families spend with television means that the medium itself shapes and defines the context in which family interaction often occurs. Based on his ethnographic research in homes, Lull (1988) argued that, “Television viewing and talk about television are extensions of nearly all forms of interpersonal communication that take place between family members” (p. 246). This section will explore how the media contextualize and impact family interaction as well as power within the family system.

Expectations About Family Life

Family members certainly learn about families from their own experiences, but they also can develop ideas from the media, particularly television. According to cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994), television is a centralized cultural storyteller that conveys a consistent set of images and representations of the world. These ritualized messages steadily and repeatedly shower viewers with a socially constructed view of reality (Gerbner, et al., 1994). In support of the theory, a great deal of evidence indicates that compared to light viewers, heavy viewers believe there is more violence in the world and are more frightened of being victims of that violence (see Morgan & Shanahan, 1996).

Television presents a fairly formulaic view of families too. For example, TV families featured in prime time are frequently headed by two parents (Robinson & Skill, 2001), with only the father employed outside the home (Heintz-Knowles, 2001). Even programs targeted to children underrepresent the proportion of single-parent homes compared to U.S. population statistics (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007). Television also provides a fairly limited view of families of color. African American families are featured more often now than in the early days of television, but they are still relatively rare (Robinson & Skill, 2001). Furthermore, Latino, Asian American, and Native American families are almost nonexistent on television (Douglas, 2003).

Perhaps more important than the form of TV families is what they do when on the screen. Television parents exhibit fairly traditional gender roles. For instance, mothers are more likely to be expressive and nurturing with children, whereas fathers are more likely to be directive and decisive (Douglas, 2003). In addition, family interactions on TV are characterized primarily by mutual affection and cooperation (Callister & Robinson, 2010) and problems get solved easily (Weiss & Wilson, 1996). One study found that very few episodes of family programming depicted instances of conflict between work and family, and rarely was this conflict the central story line (Heintz-Knowles, 2001). This pattern contrasts markedly with real life, where dual-earner families are on the rise and report experiencing great stress in trying to balance work with home (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001).

Such images can cultivate ideas about family life. For instance, in one study of over 600 fourth, sixth, and eighth graders, children who frequently viewed family shows were more likely to believe that real-life families are supportive and compliant than were those who seldom watched such programs (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 1982). These relationships held up even after controlling for grade level, sex, race, socioeconomic status, number of siblings, and total amount of TV viewing. Moreover, the relationships were strongest among children who perceived television as realistic and who reported that they learned about families from TV. Notably, exposure to family shows was not related to beliefs about how much real-life families ignore or yell at each other, which is consistent with the overall affiliative nature of such content.

In another study, Heintz (1992) surveyed 381 children between the ages of 7 and 13 about television and about their views of families. Roughly 50 percent of the children reported learning “most of the things I know” about how kids interact with parents, as well as how siblings act toward each other, from TV. Indeed, young children’s personal experiences with families are often limited to their own household and a few neighbors and friends. Consistent with this social learning from television, Heintz (1992) found a high degree of similarity between children’s descriptions of real-life families and their

descriptions of TV families. Most families were characterized as happy, helpful, nice, and cohesive, though TV families were seen as funnier than real-life families. Heintz (1992) also found that children from single-parent homes gave more negative descriptions of both real and TV fathers than did children from two-parent homes. This finding supports the idea that people form generalized mental impressions or schemas that are derived from exemplars in real life as well as in the media (Shrum, 2009). According to principles of heuristic processing, heavy television viewers are prone to rely on mental shortcuts derived from TV when making judgments about the world (Shrum, 2009).

The correlational patterns described above are bolstered by one experimental study of children's reactions to family sitcoms. Weiss and Wilson (1998) exposed elementary schoolers to an episode of *Full House* in which a child character experienced a negative emotional event in the family (e.g., a bicycle accident with an uncle). Among children who perceived the sitcom as realistic, exposure to the episode altered their perceptions of comparable emotional events in real life. In other words, a single family show had an impact on children's judgments about family events in the real world.

Adolescents also show evidence of cultivation from media exposure. In a national survey of over 3,000 high schoolers, heavy viewers of TV were more likely than light viewers to say that they wanted to get married, that they would stay married to the same person for life, and that they would have children (Signorielli, 1991). In another study, teens who frequently watched soap operas expressed fairly unrealistic views about single mothers (Larson, 1996). Compared to nonviewers, viewers were more likely to believe that single mothers have good jobs and are well-educated, do not live in poverty, and have babies who are as healthy as most babies. Young people who frequently view soap operas also are more likely to believe that marriages are fragile, that a greater proportion of people are divorced, and that a higher proportion of married people have illegitimate children and extramarital affairs (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes 1981). In contrast to soap operas, other media content may foster traditional views of family life. For example, teens who are frequent viewers of family-centered TV programs are more likely than light viewers to believe that mothers should be devoted to caring for children and in charge of the household (Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002).

Overall, then, there is consistent evidence that heavy exposure to the media is associated with particular and often unrealistic views of marriage and family. Yet despite the use of multiple controls, most evidence to date is correlational so it is difficult to assert causality. The most likely scenario is that particularly for youth, the media together with personal experiences contribute to the development of schemas about the family. Once established, those schemas affect how individuals interpret and respond to subsequent encounters with fictional families in the media (Heintz, 1992). These schemas also are likely to affect how individuals respond to their own families in real life. As an example, several married adults in one focus group study reported paying close attention to relationships on television and comparing those fictional examples to their own marriages (Gantz, 2001). They also reported having tried conflict resolution strategies they had seen on television in their own relationships. Such findings support the idea that television is a major source of socialization about the family.

Media and Family Interaction

Most of the research on the impact of media on family interaction has centered on television, which is more likely to be a shared activity than is reading a book or surfing the Internet. Yet

families differ greatly as to how much TV they actually watch together (Lull, 1980a). Obviously, individuals are less likely to view programs together when there are multiple TV sets in the home. In addition, studies indicate that younger children are more likely to watch TV with parents than are older children (Roberts et al., 1999), children generally watch more often with siblings than with parents (Lawrence & Wozniak, 1989), and children are more likely to coview with a parent when they watch adult-oriented programs than when they watch child-oriented programs (St. Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright, & Eakins, 1991).

When coviewing does occur, television has the potential to enhance family interaction in several ways. At a minimum, it brings families together into a shared social space and can foster a feeling of togetherness (Lull, 1990). In one survey, 59 percent of married adults reported that television provided an opportunity to spend time with their spouses (Gantz, 1985). Research also indicates that youth who are frequent viewers of TV spend more overall time with families (Rideout et al., 2010) and report more positive effect for family members (Larson & Kubey, 1983) than do light viewers.

Television also provides stories, topics, and jokes to stimulate conversation in families (Lull, 1990). In some cases, certain types of programs can provide a reference point for parents to use in discussing sensitive or complex topics with children (Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now, 1996). In other cases, children themselves can use television to stimulate talk. In one observational study, Reid and Frazer (1980) found that children used commercials to initiate conversation with parents about ambiguous advertising techniques as well as about topics unrelated to advertising. A recent experiment found that certain infant-directed videos actually can promote parent-child talk. In the study, parents who watched *Sesame Beginnings*, which models parent-child interaction, for two weeks at home with their infants spent significantly more time talking and singing with their infant during a free-play session in the lab than did parents who watched non-instructional videos or no videos at all (Pempek, Demers, Hanson, Kirkorian & Anderson, 2011). Even married couples can find television to be a conversational stimulant. Fallis, Fitzpatrick, and Friestad (1985) found that among adults who were classified as emotionally distant from their spouses, TV viewing was positively associated with a greater tendency to discuss relational and family issues in the marriage.

Also on the positive side, television can enrich nonverbal interaction in families. In one study, Brody, Stoneman, and Sanders (1980) observed preschoolers for 20 minutes with their parents, half the time while watching TV and half the time during family play. The researchers found a dramatic increase in physical contact between parents and the child while watching TV as compared to playing. However, fathers in particular were less likely to look at their child when the TV set was on rather than off. Other studies have documented that family members often sit close together (Schmitt, Woolf, & Anderson, 2003) and even physically comfort each other while watching television (Wilson & Weiss, 1993).

Despite these potential positive effects, there is no doubt that television can hinder talk too. The same study by Brody et al. (1980) that found an increase in touching when the TV was turned on also found a decrease in verbal interaction between parents and preschoolers. Even parental talk with babies is affected by television. One study found that when parents watched television or DVDs with their infants, they talked less to their offspring than when the television was turned off (Pempek et al., 2011). A recent experiment showed that even background television can reduce the communication between parents and infants (Kirkorian et al., 2009).

Indirectly, television can have broader effects on very young children's language development. In a recent longitudinal study, Christakis and his colleagues (2009) had a sample of over 300 babies (2–48 months) wear a digital recorder on random days for a two-year period. The researchers found that television exposure was associated with reductions over time in child vocalizations and conversational turns as well in the number of words that the child heard from an adult. In a similar study by the same researchers, the number of conversational turns that young children had with an adult caretaker predicted increased language development six months later (Zimmerman et al., 2009). Furthermore, having the television on in a room reduced the number of conversation turns.

Even when television programming is designed to be “educational,” infants seem to learn better from face-to-face-communication. In one recent study, 12- to 18-month olds watched popular baby videos for four weeks at home, either with or without parental interaction during the programming (DeLoache et al., 2010). Afterward, they were tested on 25 vocabulary words featured in the videos. Compared to a no-video control group, neither of the video conditions improved vocabulary. Moreover, a fourth condition involving just parental instruction on the 25 words outperformed both video groups. Other research confirms that infants learn to imitate simple behaviors more easily from live interaction than from watching a model on the screen (Hayne et al., 2003). All in all, having a television turned on for long periods of time in households with very young children may be detrimental to infant development.

Irrespective of age, reduction in human interaction will occur any time attention is drawn to the screen and away from other people in the room. Therefore, scholars need to take an expansive view of verbal interaction, looking at talk that occurs not only during a program but also during commercial breaks and once a program is over. In some cases, television may have its greatest impact on interaction outside the viewing context altogether (Alexander, 2001), where it may be used to establish common ground, initiate conversations, and even debate popular culture.

Rather than increasing or decreasing conversation, television may be used in some families to avoid talk altogether. Rosenblatt and Cunningham (1976) found that television viewing was positively related to family tension, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, number of people in the household, and whether the family was headed by one or two parents. The researchers also found that TV viewing was higher in homes with greater population density (persons per room), suggesting that the media may provide a way to head off stress associated with overcrowding. Television can be used to cope with other family tensions as well. One study found that children with alcoholic fathers watched more television than did children whose fathers drank moderately or not at all (Brooks, Gaines, Mueller, & Jenkins, 1998). Other studies have documented that children in high stress environments are likely to be heavy viewers of television (Henggeler, Cohen, Edwards, Summerville, & Ray, 1991).

Clearly, television has mixed effects on family interaction. What about newer technologies such as cell phones and the Internet? A national survey of over 2,000 adults reveals that the picture is mixed here too (Kennedy, Smith, Wells, & Wellman, 2008). Married couples who both owned cell phones reported that they contacted their spouse on a daily basis to chat and to coordinate schedules more often than did couples with no cell phones. In addition, parents reported more daily contact with their child if they owned a cell phone compared to a landline. Furthermore, one in four (25 percent) respondents felt that their family today was closer than their childhood family because

of the Internet and cell phones. Still, most respondents (60 percent) reported no impact of these technologies on the closeness of their families. On the negative side, families with high levels of technology were less likely to eat dinner together and more likely to feel dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent together. It is difficult to draw causal conclusions here, especially given that technology ownership also was associated with longer work hours.

Other studies confirm these mixed patterns. In an in-depth study of Dutch families, Christensen (2009) found that cell phones helped busy, spatially dispersed families feel a “connected presence” through the use of frequent calls and text messages. The Internet may be different, however. Nie, Hillygus, and Erbring (2002) found that adults who spent more time with the Internet, particularly at home and on the weekends, spent less time in face-to-face interaction with family members. Supporting this idea, a survey of over 200 fourth through sixth grade Korean children found that greater use of the Internet was related to a perceived decline in family time (Lee & Chae, 2007). Moreover, time spent playing games online was correlated with a perceived decline in both family time and family talk.

To summarize, media serve a variety of social functions in the family. They can help bring families together or they can keep them apart. Likewise, media can facilitate the expression of ideas and be used as the basis for talk or they can be used to avoid conversation. Future studies need to move beyond descriptive data and begin to delineate the conditions under which television and newer media serve these very different purposes. Do crises such as divorce or substance abuse alter the role of media in family interactions? Do family life cycles impact how media are used? For example, is television used differently when a child is born or when a family member retires? Addressing such questions will guide us toward a more integrated understanding of the social impact of media use on the family.

Conflict Over the Media

Family conflict occurs over a variety of issues, including the media. For example, two family members simultaneously may want to use a piece of technology that is designed for individual use. Even when media technology can be shared, family members may disagree on what to listen to or watch. Buying additional equipment and moving older technologies to children’s bedrooms is one way to reduce family conflict over access to the media. Yet even in homes with multiple televisions, families still can have preferences for certain sets because of location or advanced capabilities (Lull, 1978).

How often do the media cause conflict in families? Several scholars have looked at marital conflict in particular as it relates to the media. In one study, Gantz (2001) conducted a series of focus groups, intensive interviews, and a survey to further explore marital conflict over television. In the survey portion, 145 adults were asked how often several potentially problematic behaviors regarding TV had occurred in their household. The vast majority acknowledged that in the past year television had interfered with a shared marital activity, prevented someone from doing household chores, and interfered with a conversation one spouse was trying to have with the other spouse. Women reported being more bothered than men by these disruptions, yet the overall ratings were low, suggesting that TV was not perceived as much of a problem in these marriages. The focus groups and interviews further revealed that couples did sometimes disagree on what to watch and on the volume level of television, but that none of these

conflicts were considered serious and that they were easily resolved by using separate TV sets or by leaving the room to pursue other activities. Although Gantz (2001) found a great deal of partner accommodation and flexibility regarding media habits, he acknowledged that such adaptation may be less common in seriously troubled marriages and in crowded households with limited technology.

One way families can make adjustments is to establish informal or formal rules about control of the media. For example, fathers consistently are perceived by other family members as having the most influence in selecting TV programs to watch (Lull, 1978). Adult males in families also typically dominate the remote control device (Gantz, 2001). Even among gay couples, there is typically a dominant remote control user, although lesbian couples are more likely to share the device (Walker, 1996).

Patterns of control can be challenged, however. Gantz (2001) has documented that marital battles do occur over the remote control device. In particular, women complain that men engage in too much grazing (i.e., flipping from channel to channel) and often change the channel during inopportune times in a program. Yet in the end, women seldom take charge of the remote control; instead they are more likely to move to another TV set if remote control behaviors become too annoying (Walker, 1996).

Power and control are seldom equal in parent–child relationships either. Children are far less influential than their parents in determining what families view on TV (Lull, 1978). In accord with this, children report being less satisfied than parents with the way their families make decisions about television (Lull, 1982). Even teens struggle with control issues. In one study, 37 percent of adolescents reported that they argue with their parents over TV at least once in awhile (Morgan, Alexander, Shanahan, & Harris, 1990).

Children also can disagree with each other over the media. In the study by Morgan and his colleagues (1990) mentioned above, a substantially higher proportion of teens reported arguing about television with siblings (60 percent) than with parents (37 percent). It stands to reason that sibling conflict may be greater given that children are more likely to watch TV with a brother or sister than a parent (Roberts et al., 1999). But even here, there is a “pecking order”; older siblings typically dominate over younger siblings in disagreements about program selections (Zahn & Baran, 1984).

Not only does program selection cause difficulties, but particular types of messages in the media can instigate family conflict as well. For example, research indicates that exposure to TV advertising can result in parent–child friction (e.g., Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). In one study, preschoolers who were randomly assigned to view a cartoon containing six food commercials engaged in significantly more attempts to get a parent to purchase products during a subsequent grocery store visit than did preschoolers who had seen the same cartoon without ads in it (Stoneman & Brody, 1981). Furthermore, mothers of the preschoolers who had seen the ads engaged in substantially more control strategies during the shopping trip, such as telling the child “no” and encouraging the child to put items back on the shelf.

Newer technologies, such as cell phones, also can trigger family disputes. Lenhart and her colleagues (2010) found that teens’ attachment to their phones is a source of conflict and regulation for parents. Indeed, a majority of parents surveyed by the researchers reported that they attempt to regulate their teen’s cell phone use by either checking the content of the phone (64 percent), limiting the times of day a child can use the cell (52 percent), or even taking the phone away from the teen as a form of punishment (62 percent). Although most teens agreed that the cell phone kept them linked to family, some reported feeling suffocated by the constant connectivity to their parents. Computer

and Internet use also can be a point of contention within modern families. Much like cell phone use, many parents try to monitor their children's computer activities. One national survey of 800 parent and teen dyads found that a majority of adolescents (60 percent) reported having rules about the Internet, which many felt were an impingement on their growing need for autonomy (Mesch, 2006). These rules were related to family conflict about Internet use, which occurred among 40 percent of those surveyed. Furthermore, conflict about adolescents' use of the Internet occurred more frequently in families where the child was perceived as the computer expert.

Based on research reviewed here, it is clear that television and other media can instigate conflict among family members. In most families, disagreements over how to use the media are perceived as fairly manageable and even predictable. In general, the same power differentials that exist in other family routines get played out in front of the television screen. Some of this conflict can be alleviated by having additional TV sets and private media spaces in the home. But future research should examine how families with fewer resources as well as those with high degrees of conflict cope with the media. In addition, studies need to explore how disagreements about content and equipment get resolved, especially as media technologies become increasingly personal and interactive.

The Impact of the Family on Media Experiences

Up to this point, we have considered ways in which the media influence, transform, and provide a context for family communication. But the family itself also impacts people's media experiences. Families have different values and communication styles, which in turn affect how children use the media. In addition, parents differ greatly as to how often and in what ways they help their children deal with media. Each of these topics will be considered below.

Family Communication Patterns

Early work by Chaffee and McLeod revealed that parents have different values regarding communication that they teach and reinforce during child rearing (McLeod, Atkin, & Chaffee, 1972). Some parents are socio-oriented in that they emphasize harmony, conformity, and getting along with others. Other parents are concept-oriented because they encourage expression of ideas, critical thinking, and open debate of opinions. Chaffee and McLeod devised the Family Communication Patterns (FCP) typology whereby families could fit into one of four quadrants based on whether they score low or high on these two orientations.

The typology has spawned a great deal of research, much of which indicates that the norms of communication in a family can predict a great deal about media habits. For example, socio-oriented families watch more television overall but consume less news in the media than do concept-oriented families (Lull, 1980b). Socio-oriented individuals are more likely to use TV for social purposes like family solidarity, companionship, and having conversation (Lull, 1980b). Consistent with these social motives, adolescents from socio-oriented families tend to share viewing patterns with their parents more so than do teens in families where this orientation is weak (Chaffee & Tims, 1976). In contrast, concept-oriented families perceive television as a way to instill values and facilitate arguments, reflecting their overall emphasis on ideas rather than people (Lull, 1980b). As might be expected, concept orientation is positively associated with adolescents' interest

in politics, discussion about political issues, and attention to political campaigns (Chaffee & Tims, 1976).

The dimensions also are predictive of what parents do *while* viewing television with children. Fujikola and Austin (2002) surveyed over 200 parents of third, sixth, and ninth graders and found that concept-oriented parents were more likely to critique TV messages and talk about television content with their children than were socio-oriented parents. In contrast, socio-oriented parents were more likely to coview or watch TV with their children. Recent research suggests that family communication styles may even buffer some of the negative effects of the media. In a survey of 360 parent–child dyads, Buijzen and Valkenburg (2005) assessed children’s television viewing habits, their consumer behaviors, and family communication. The researchers found that concept-oriented communication moderated (and weakened) the relationship between exposure to advertising and children’s purchase requests and materialism as well as parent–child conflict. Socio-communication had no such moderating effect. The researchers argued that parents who discuss consumer decision making and encourage independent thinking help arm their children against persuasive advertising compared to parents who encourage conformity.

Although the FCP dimensions have been used widely in media research, they have not been immune to critique. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) challenged the assumption that norms of communication are widely shared within a family. They found considerable within-family variation when surveying each parent separately as well as the children, suggesting a more complex model of family norms and patterns of interaction. In addition, the longstanding interpretation of the two dimensions has been questioned. Ritchie (1991), for example, found evidence that socio-orientation is actually associated with parental assertion of power and control, which often produces congruency rather than harmony, whereas concept-orientation is associated with supportive and open communication. This revised interpretation coalesces with research indicating that families high in concept orientation, not socio-orientation, exhibit more warmth and affection (Krcmar, 1996). The revised dimensions also parallel a large body of research in child development that characterizes parenting styles in terms of both affection and control (Demo & Cox, 2000).

To summarize, family communication patterns clearly affect the amount of time spent with the media as well as preferences for certain types of content. The FCP model has dominated the research in this area for the past 25 years, but has been challenged on both conceptual and methodological grounds. Future studies should look more closely at the extent to which family members agree on communication norms and values, and also the extent to which these particular dimensions are valid across families that differ by race and ethnicity, composition, income, and even size.

Family Mediation

There is little doubt that extensive exposure to the media, particularly television, can result in harmful effects on children such as increasing aggression, causing fear reactions, and teaching stereotypes (see Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). Given that TV is difficult to avoid, considerable interest has been given to ways in which adults can “mediate” or alter a child’s viewing experiences. The goal of mediation typically is to prevent antisocial outcomes from media exposure, but mediation also can be used to enhance positive effects such as learning from educational programming (e.g., Corder-Bolz, 1980). Over the past few decades, researchers have used the term “mediation” to

refer to a host of different activities, resulting in conceptual confusion in the literature (Nathanson, 2001a). Today, most researchers agree that there are three major forms of mediation: instructive mediation, restrictive mediation, and covieing (e.g., Borzekowski & Robinson, 2007).

Instructive mediation refers to discussions that parents or other adults have with children about television and other media. The goal typically is to explain content or evaluate it in some way. Restrictive mediation refers to rules that parents set about how much time and what types of content children are permitted to experience with TV and in other media. Covieing is the most elusive form of mediation to define. At a minimum, covieing refers to those occasions in which parents watch television with their child. However, conversation can occur during this covieing which, if it pertains to TV, also entails elements of instructive mediation. Still, covieing can occur without talk, and instructive mediation can occur outside of covieing. Thus, researchers argue that the two forms of mediation should be kept conceptually and methodologically distinct (e.g., Nathanson, 2001a).

Frequency of Mediation

The amount of mediation that occurs in families is typically measured through self-report data. Not surprisingly, parents' reports of how often they engage in mediation often differ from those of children. For example, 62 percent of American parents report having rules that govern their children's television viewing (Stanger & Gridina, 1999), yet in a national survey of children themselves, only 46 percent report that there are rules about what they can watch on TV, and that figure drops to 26 percent among children over the age of 14 (Rideout et al., 2010). Such discrepancies emerge even when parents and children from the same families are queried (Vitrup, 2009). Part of the discrepancy presumably is due to social desirability on the part of parents. Yet it is also the case that children may be unaware of certain mediation efforts, like rules, unless they are explicitly stated by parents. In addition, discussions about the media that occur outside the context of exposure may go unnoticed by children and even by parents themselves. Clearly, researchers need to make efforts to validate self-reports of mediation through the use of observational techniques in the home and even alternative self-report measures such as diaries.

Despite differing views on the frequency of mediation, both parents and children seem to recognize that the Internet is different than more traditional media. In a recent national survey, children between the ages of 8 and 18 more often reported that they have rules about what they are allowed to do on the computer than about what they can watch on TV, what music they can listen to, or what videogames they can play (Rideout et al., 2010). Indeed, a majority of parents say that they mediate their children's use of the Internet in some way (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). This parental intervention is certainly fueled by concerns over children talking with strangers (Peter et al., 2006) and revealing personal information (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005) online.

The logistics of such mediation are complicated by the fact that youth are often more adept at using the Internet than their parents are (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Nevertheless, parents have devised several methods for helping children navigate the Internet and often these tactics are adaptations from TV mediation (Warren & Bluma, 2002). One common approach is to use some form of restrictive mediation (Eastin, Greenberg, & Hofschire, 2006), which typically involves setting rules about when and for how long children can go online. Other strategies include purchasing blocking software that

prevents children from visiting particular websites and setting computers up in public spaces in the home to monitor what children are doing online (Cottrell et al., 2007). Despite a plethora of popular software products, technological restriction is the least utilized tactic among parents (Cottrell, et al., 2007).

Although less prevalent than restrictive mediation, parents also report that they “co-use” or “co-surf” the Internet with their children (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Much like covieving television, co-use of the Internet does not necessarily mean that parents talk to their children about the websites. However, research suggests that some parents do engage in instructive mediation by discussing particular websites with children, providing both positive and negative evaluations of the content (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). Even here, though, parents and children differ in their perception of how often this type of mediation occurs. In one study, slightly over half of parents (52 percent) reported that they have conversations with their teenager about inappropriate websites whereas only 20 percent of their adolescents reported having such discussions (Cottrell et al., 2007).

Parents apply the same three types of mediation to video game play as they do to TV viewing and Internet use (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). A study of 500 Dutch parent–child dyads found that parents most often employ restrictive mediation by specifying which games can be played and which are forbidden, and by monitoring gaming behavior (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). The second most used strategy is active mediation, which entails telling children that games are just fantasy, pointing out good and bad things about the game, and explaining what happens in a game. Parents are least likely to use co-play, or playing the video game with their child, as a form of mediation.

Predictors of Mediation

Some parents mediate a great deal, whereas others do very little to intervene in their children’s media habits (Austin et al., 1999). Several factors consistently emerge as predictors of parental mediation. One is the age of the child. Parents are far more likely to prohibit the viewing of certain TV programs, control the overall amount of viewing, and discuss television with younger than with older children (Warren et al., 2002). Research indicates that younger children are more susceptible to the harmful effects of television (Paik & Comstock, 1994), so it is encouraging that parents are exercising greater intervention with younger viewers. Covieving, on the other hand, does not seem to be consistently related to age (Dorr, Kovaric, & Doubleday, 1989; Nathanson, 2001b). Age of the child not only predicts television mediation but also Internet monitoring. Several recent studies indicate that parents mediate the Internet more often with younger children than with older children or teens (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Wang, Bianchi & Raley, 2005).

Another predictor of mediation is parental attitudes toward the media. Studies show that parents who are concerned about the harmful effects of television, particularly of violent and frightening content, engage in more restrictive as well as instructive mediation with their children (e.g., Warren et al., 2002). Moreover, parents who are less trusting of TV advertising report more often discussing the unreal nature of commercials and of television in general with their children (Austin et al., 1999). Likewise, parents who perceive that videogames have a negative effect on children are more inclined to use restrictive and active mediation (Nikken & Jansz, 2006). On the other hand, parents who believe that television can teach positive lessons about the world are more likely to coviev or simply watch TV with their children than are parents who do not hold this view (Nathanson, 2001b). Similarly, parents who perceive that videogames can have a positive

effect on children's social and emotional well-being are more likely to co-play with their offspring than are other parents (Nikken & Jansz, 2006).

Parental demographics are less useful in predicting mediation, in part because of inconsistencies in the findings. For example, some studies have found that mothers more often engage in mediation with television (Valkenburg et al., 1998) and with video games (Nikken & Jansz, 2006) than fathers do. Yet others have found that sex of the parent does not predict mediation (Warren et al., 2002). Still others, particularly those that focus on the Internet, have found that mediation occurs more often with fathers than with mothers (e.g., Wang et al., 2005). Employment outside the home seems to curtail mediation (Warren, 2005), which may partly account for divergent findings by parent sex across studies. Also, some studies suggest that parents who are highly educated are more likely to set rules about television and to discuss TV with their children (e.g., Borzekowski & Robinson, 2007), whereas others find no relationship between parent education and such mediation efforts (e.g., Warren et al., 2002). Looking beyond demographics, Warren and his colleagues examined level of parental involvement as a predictor of mediation (Warren et al., 2002). They found that parents who share domestic activities like schoolwork and household projects with their children are more likely to engage in all three forms of mediation (instructive, restrictive, and covieing). In fact, shared activities were better predictors of mediation than was the sheer amount of time parents spent with children in the home.

Parenting style also seems to predict mediation approaches. Eastin and his colleagues (2006) surveyed 520 mothers about Internet monitoring of their teens. They found that mothers who used an authoritative parenting style (i.e., assertive but supportive) were more likely to engage in both instructive and restrictive Internet mediation than were those who used authoritarian (i.e., demanding but not supportive) or neglectful (neither demanding nor supportive) styles. Even co-use or covieing of websites with teens occurred more often with authoritative mothers.

Finally, the extent of technology in the home seems to affect mediation. For example, as the number of television sets increase, there is less parental control over what children watch and when (van der Voort et al., 1992). Parental sophistication with technology also matters (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008). One study of 749 parent-teen dyads found that Internet-experienced parents were more likely to install monitoring software as well as check the websites their children visited than were other parents (Wang et al., 2005).

Impact of Mediation

Most research on the impact of mediation has concentrated on instructive strategies that involve talking with a child about media content. For example, laboratory studies indicate that watching with an adult who asks questions and provides information can increase preschoolers' learning from educational programs such as *Sesame Street* (Corder-Bolz, 1980). Experiments suggest that adult commentary about television can also help children to better recall and understand program content (Valkenburg et al., 1998; Watkins, Calvert, Huston-Stein, & Wright, 1980). Most of these studies involve single interventions with adult mediators who are not the children's parents. However, several correlational studies have looked at the impact of ongoing efforts by parents themselves. In one study, parental conversation about TV was related to a better understanding of how unrealistic television is among children (Messaris & Kerr, 1983). Another study tracked kindergartners and first graders and found that early parental discussion of TV predicted higher

comprehension of content and greater ability to discriminate reality from fantasy one year later (Singer, Singer, Desmond, Hirsch, & Nicol, 1988).

Clearly, parental discussion can boost children's learning from television. It may also impact learning from computers. One study of 200 Korean fourth through sixth graders found that parental discussion and endorsement of good websites as well as co-use of the Internet predicted an increase in children's self-reported use of the Internet for educational purposes (Lee & Chae, 2007).

Instructive mediation also can prevent harmful effects from occurring. Watching with an adult who comments on the unrealistic nature of TV can reduce children's fear reactions to scary programming (Cantor, Sparks, & Hoffner, 1988; Wilson & Weiss, 1991). Moreover, hearing a parent or an adult make negative evaluations about TV violence can reduce children's approval of interpersonal aggression (Corder-Bolz, 1980) and decrease their tendency to act aggressively after viewing such material (Nathanson, 1999). An adult who simply encourages a child to think about the victim of violence can encourage more critical attitudes toward TV content and even decrease the tendency to engage in aggression afterward (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000). Moreover, parents who discuss and evaluate advertising can help children resist persuasive appeals in commercials (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005). Finally, adult commentary about gender stereotypes on television can encourage children to be more critical of such content and even reduce stereotyped attitudes in some cases (Nathanson, 2010).

Less research has been conducted on the impact of restrictive mediation. In general, children who watch excessive amounts of television are at greater risk for a variety of harmful outcomes (see Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009), so that any effort to monitor and control children's viewing is likely to offset these patterns. In fact, Robinson and his colleagues found that a six-month classroom intervention to reduce television and videogame use among third and fourth graders significantly decreased their aggressive behavior (Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel, & Varady, 2001), requests for toys (Robinson, Saphir, Kraemer, Varady, & Haydel, 2001), and even body fat levels (Robinson, 1999). Beyond school, parental regulation can produce similar beneficial outcomes (Nathanson, 1999).

Parental rules can be effective in managing the Internet too. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) surveyed over 800 U.K. teens and their parents about Internet mediation in the home. Overall, parental rules about the Internet were associated with a lower likelihood that adolescents engaged in a variety of potentially risky activities online, such as visiting chat rooms and downloading software. These patterns held up regardless of whether rulemaking was measured using the parents' or the children's reports. However, having rules about the Internet had no impact on teens' self-reported exposure to risky content (e.g., violent, pornographic, stranger interaction) on the Internet. A similar study found that parental monitoring of the Internet was associated with teens engaging in less disapproved behavior online, but only when the youth were aware of their parents' mediation efforts (Cottrell et al., 2007). All in all, restrictive mediation seems to work best with youth when it is not so prohibitive that it creates a "forbidden fruit" type of effect (Bushman & Cantor, 2003; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008) and when the restrictions are presented in the context of open and supportive parent-child communication (Cottrell et al., 2007).

The third form of mediation, *coviewing* or *co-using*, is more difficult to ascertain because it sometimes includes discussion of the content as well. Those studies that isolate mere viewing from instructive mediation suggest that *coviewing* by itself does not

necessarily help children become more sophisticated viewers (Dorr et al., 1989) nor does it prevent children from learning aggressive attitudes and behaviors from TV (Nathanson, 1999). In fact, coviewing a violent program with a parent can be interpreted by the child as an endorsement of such content (Nathanson, 2001b). Likewise, a recent study found that co-playing *age-inappropriate* videogames with a parent was associated with increased depression and anxiety among adolescent girls (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, Stockdale, & Day, 2011). On the other hand, playing age-appropriate games with a parent predicted positive outcomes such as decreased aggression and increased prosocial behavior in girls. Yet these patterns were based on correlational data and none were observed among teen boys. Clearly, more work on the co-use of newer media is needed.

There is one arena in which coviewing can actually have a beneficial or therapeutic effect. Several studies suggest that watching with a parent can help a child feel less frightened during a scary program (see Cantor, 1998a). Notably, children who watch television with siblings instead of parents can also profit from coviewing. In one study, Wilson and Weiss (1993) found that watching with an older sibling reduced preschoolers' fear responses to a suspenseful movie scene. The sibling pairs often sought physical comfort from each other during the program, and the older sibling also verbally reassured the preschooler. However, watching with an older sibling actually reduced preschoolers' comprehension of the program, suggesting that coviewers sometimes can be distracting.

To summarize, families play a critical role in how children respond to media content. Parents who actively discuss and evaluate media messages with their children can increase the prosocial effects and also ameliorate some of the harmful effects of exposure. Setting limits and rules about exposure also can be beneficial, especially if such restrictions foster a more critical orientation to the media (Desmond, Singer & Singer, 1990). However, there is some evidence that extreme levels of restrictive mediation can backfire (Nathanson, 1999), which actually can result in heightened attraction to objectionable content (Cantor, 1998b). Merely watching programs, playing videogames, or surfing the Internet with children and not discussing the content seems like a missed opportunity for parents, particularly if these co-use experiences are perceived by children as an endorsement of the messages. Still, much of this research is based on what parents *say* they do. Future studies need to incorporate observational measures of ongoing interactions as families experience media together. Studies that have done this suggest that topics of conversation are rich and diverse, talk differs greatly as a function of the type of content involved, and both verbal and nonverbal interaction occurs in front of the screen (Brody et al., 1980; Schmitt et al., 2003; Wilson & Weiss, 1993).

Conclusions

The relationship between the media and family communication is complex and interdependent (Andreasen, 2001). Family life is organized and defined in part by media technologies, particularly television. From a family systems perspective, the media provide a useful framework for studying how families define themselves and create a socially constructed set of roles, values, and norms (Alexander, 2001). In turn, the family exercises influence over the media experiences of its members both inside and outside the home. Hence, there is a complicated set of pathways that connect these two institutions.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. First, the media strongly shape the rhythms of family life (Jordan, 1992). In many families, the architecture of the house,

evening meals, and even conversations are structured around large-screen TV sets with accompanying audio-visual technology. But even in homes where television is less central, the newspaper and radio are often integral to adult routines, and books, DVDs, and even videogames are frequently part of children's bedtime rituals. As families structure their activities around the media, the technologies themselves become part of how family members negotiate their social reality. To capture these systemic relationships, researchers need to move beyond self-report data and observe families as they grapple with the media. Recording family interactions in the home, engaging in participant observation, and even using media diaries over time are all methods that have been under-utilized but that represent rich opportunities to address these issues.

Second, the media play an important role in shaping our beliefs and expectations about family life. Our views of the family come from a variety of sources of information, including personal experience. According to theorizing by Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002), cognitive representations of the family include information about intimacy, affection, power, and even values regarding communication. These relational schemas are built over time and influence how people interpret and interact with members of their family. A child who spends a great deal of time alone in her bedroom watching television is likely to develop schemas about families that are fairly idealized. Is that child prone to disappointment and frustration when her own family life differs from these television ideals? Future research needs to consider the impact of both idealized and dysfunctional media images of the family on relational beliefs. Studies also need to explore the extent to which media in bedrooms can isolate children from other socializing forces, making parasocial relationships with media characters a potential substitute for the family itself.

Third, the nature of the family is undergoing rapid institutional change that is not often reflected in research. At present, we know a great deal about how middle-class, Caucasian families interact with the media. But we know very little about media experiences in families of color, single-parent families, gay and lesbian families, blended families, grandparent-headed families, dual-career families, and even adoptive families. The fact that African American families watch more television (Rideout et al., 2010) and that working-class families use television less ritualistically (Jordan, 1992) are signals that we need to be more sensitive to diversity among families when we study media habits and family communication.

The media too are undergoing change. Traditional forms of media are converging and interactive technologies are rapidly becoming the norm. Furthermore, digital technologies are making mediated experiences seem ever more realistic and life-like. It is clear too that family communication is being transformed as it is mediated increasingly by computers, cell phones, and other devices. What impact are these mobile technologies having on family closeness, conflict, and well-being? And as media use becomes increasingly personal and portable, how will parents monitor and mediate their children's exposure?

Finally, the vast majority of the studies to date are cross-sectional and often correlational. It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from such research about the factors that are responsible for variations in family communication and media use. Longitudinal studies of families are urgently needed in this arena. Such research can address how the media influence family communication over time as well as how changes in the structure of the family affect media habits and experiences. Longitudinal studies also can explore the impact of crises and different life cycles in the family on communication patterns and media use. In general, we need more sophisticated theories and methods to capture the

complexities of how families of the 21st century are dealing with rapidly changing media technologies and content.

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