Seductive Screens

Seductive Screens:
Children's Media—Past, Present, and Future

By

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For David, Jonathan, James, and especially Shelley,
for their loving support

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

LONG DAY'S JOURNEY BACK TO CHILDHOOD

As a child of the fifties, I was able to both listen to "the thunderous hoofbeats of the great horse Silver" emanating from our floor-model Philco radio and later view the hyperactive movements of a puppet dressed as a cowboy on a seven-inch Dumont black-and-white TV via *The Howdy Doody Show*. However, my first media love was comic books. For ten cents, I could visit the "Golden Age" of Batman, Superman, and the Submariner over and over again, and even act out some of the plots with my best friend, Seymour. It was therefore quite traumatic when the crusading psychiatrist Frederic Wertham attacked my favorite comics as being dangerous, oversexed, and a major cause of delinquency. Classics such as *Weird Science* and *Tales of the Crypt* were soon deemed amoral and removed from newsstands.

I grew up in a poor neighborhood that was rich in movie houses, boasting four theatres within a ten-block radius. One film palace, an opulent Loews, had chandeliers, plush seats, and two candy counters. I would spend many hours alone there eating popcorn and munching Clark Bars while watching Lash LaRue, mad scientists, and three very funny men bopping each other on the head. In this very theater I also saw the latest noir films from Hollywood, as my grandmother took me to see Robert Mitchum, Jane Russell, Betty Davis, and John Garfield in all their corrupt glory. My grandmother made little distinction between the characters portrayed by the actors on the screen and their "real" life as depicted in the numerous fan magazines that she consumed. "Michael! See

that dark-haired woman? She was made pregnant by the guy we saw last week. Michael, look! She murdered her husband in the desert and buried him there, and her studio is covering it up." Cover-ups, murders, studios, pregnancy—this was all too confusing for my six-year-old mind.

The films I watched in the dark also brought to light many bright future possibilities, far removed from what I then knew. Much like the adventure novels and biographies that I devoured at the local children's library, the movies had doctors, writers, explorers, and scientists living comfortable, stimulating lives. The stories of comics, radio, books, TV, and films were the substance of my early life, and helped launch my journey into adulthood and a career in medicine.

Today, in my psychiatric work with families, I have observed that the pace of life is speeding up and that parents are increasingly unavailable. Early in my practice, I often wondered if my troubled young patients had become "better" by my efforts alone, or whether they had been helped along by the "therapeutic commute" to my office with their parents. Riding to the therapist provided both children and parents an opportunity to be in a safe, quiet, and captive bubble. They could raise issues and express feelings, possibly resolving them. Now, in our high-tech world, I fear, parents speak to their broker or difficult relative while on their smartphone, as kids text their friends. Direct interaction is gone; meaningful conversations have been abandoned. My office is not immune, as cell phones ring in group, family, and individual sessions, intruding on the doctor-patient relationship, interrupting free associations, and blocking psychological insight. It is fascinating that even while they are immersed in psychotherapy, a time-limited, expensive, and intense activity, patients always look to see who is calling or texting. What chance do I, as a mere therapist, have in fighting against

depression, anxiety, abusive parents, odd expectations, and bullies, in the world of the iPhone?

Our current society, under the influence of a media preoccupied with the rich and famous, wants more: more material possessions, more sexual pleasure, more make-believe, and most of all, more stimulation. Consider *The Kardashians*, the stock market, credit card debt, nonstop communication, and the time required to enjoy, work for, and pay for them. Unfortunately, kids are left behind in a void filled by a celebrity-driven kids' popular culture. Radio, then television, and now the Internet and smartphones act as detached but powerful babysitters; they have replaced parents who might have read to their children and played with them. Children's new play patterns and the lack of available caregivers reflect such neglect. As a consequence, kids have become overattached to their screens. Children today not only want to watch or listen to their favorite screen icon—i.e., their "babysitter"—but they also want to buy what these screens are selling. They want a share of celebrity, a piece of the real or comic personality whose name or picture is on their purchase. This allows kids to share in LeBron's or Batman's celebrity glow. These sports stars, TV celebrities, and fantasy characters represent power, glamour, money, beauty, fun, masculinity, femininity—and therefore respect. Their glow is promoted not only by the media, but also by the parental void, as well as the unhealthy desire of the helicopter mother or father who is overinvolved with his or her kids and needs to buy all things with a brand name for their entitled offspring. The characters on these screens act as totems or fetishes to spark the imagination of kids who crave a powerful presence, a role parents seem to have abdicated. These kids also want what the superheroes, supermodels, and superstars possess: invulnerability. Parents buy these screen-driven purchases as a weak substitute for their own lack of symbolic representation

and presence. This consumerism mollifies their own feelings of guilt.

Powerful agents have thus joined forces to capture our kids through an increasingly seductive children's media. They have done this through:

1. The creation of a profitable children's market, promoted by huge media companies and made possible by the abovementioned guilty and enabling parents, as well as by their entitled children.
2. The use of writers, studios, networks, and media information corporations that appreciate the psychology of guilt and understand childhood as a dynamic process with rules and developmental milestones.
3. The insight that parents have their own needs and want relief, and that children's media can serve as an effective form of social control or babysitter.
4. The understanding that advances in technology and finance have the power to change the three factors above.

Unfortunately, this perfect storm of variables, fueled by profits, is not without consequences, as our kids are routinely exposed to inappropriate, immoral, violent, and sexually explicit screen content. All this occurs while imagination, physical experiences, and education go a-begging. Children now passively participate in a shallow culture of rampant consumerism and fast-food intake. Kids today also participate in an information and social-networking explosion. Every child has access to his or her own library, communication system with friends, photo gallery, game store, school update board, and streaming entertainment, as well as a blizzard of commercial messages. There is also, of course, the potential for sexting and bullying via smartphones and Facebook.

In recent years, as a result of monitoring my own children as well as my patients, I have become increasingly aware of the media's increased influence on children's lives. A child cannot help but be altered by spending upwards of twenty-five hours of screen time a week. Because of this reality, and my

own admitted fascination with *Batman* and *Family Guy*, I found myself devoting a significant portion of my time to becoming an advocate for children to promote a more responsible, less commercial, less violent, and more pro-social media. Using my background in psychiatry, I have come to understand a child's identification with comic characters, and the various story lines of sibling rivalry, separation, powerlessness, and fantasy that plug into every child's psyche.

Although Dr. Wertham ripped apart a large part of my childhood by having my favorite comic books banned, it is now clear that the author of *Seduction of the Innocent* was a true public health advocate and a protector of children. It is therefore no accident that my book is entitled *Seductive Screens.* Is children's media entertaining and educational, or a Trojan horse bearing hyper-consumerism, violence, and poor health? This book examines this question, and is also an attempt to reconcile my own, admittedly ambivalent relationship with children's media, as I often use it as a therapeutic tool to understand the inner workings of a child's mind. It is my further hope that this book will serve as a beginning to the reader's quest to understand the dynamic nature of a media with few rules or boundaries. Indeed, the media's rapacious need to create psychologically appealing material engineered to create the highest level of profit, changes almost daily, and I want to trace this shifting landscape. My book operates interactively, with exercises at the end of several chapters. In this way, a partnership should evolve, allowing us to evaluate our roles as both audience and critic, and enabling us to understand the seductive phenomenon of children's media.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BASICS: WHAT IS THE MEDIA?

What is the media?

The communication tools for creating, saving, and disseminating information.

What is a child?

We use different criteria to define a child, based on our own observations of children plus:

1.   Chronological age. Is someone below twelve a child? Do we also include teenagers?
2.   Emotional maturity. Do we judge this by the amount of responsibility a child takes for him- or herself in relation to good behavior, good grades, and leadership qualities?
3.   Cognitive progress. We can base this on grades, ability to express oneself, understanding of ideas, curiosity, reading ability, standardized test scores, capacity to differentiate fantasy from reality, and the ability to understand groupings and metaphors.
4.   Extent of personal responsibility. This is judged by how well a child can support him- or herself.
5.   Physiology. We assess this by looking at bone growth, hormone levels, brain size, and height.
6.   Legal Age Markers. The legal age that allows one to drink, vote and drive.
7.   Educational level. We look at what grade a child is in and define age based on scholastic achievement.
8.   Needs. This, to me, is this most interesting category. Here, we assess how much an individual needs to be protected from harm. We look at issues related to innocence concerning death and sexuality. We also try to explore coping skills and the level of

socialization a child has achieved. This might also include thinking about experience in the real world and how this affects the senses, including touch and smell. Needs can also be understood in terms of engagement with fantasy and play.

It is clear that defining a child is not an easy task, because children are not small adults and their development is so variable and complex.

What is children's programming?

Kids' shows have certain formulaic elements: color, fun, music, and make believe. They may contain animals, puppets, and animation. While these entertainments are light and superficial, they do deal with issues that plug into a child's psyche: separation, siblings, trust, good and bad behavior, risk, and school. Themes rarely involve money and sex directly, but often try to project a "moral" or lesson about friendship, loyalty, and cooperation.

Why do kids use media?

Kids, like adults, use media, primarily for **entertainment.** Children's programming must be fun, stimulating, exciting, and interesting. The content offers a temporary **escape** from conflict, school, and worries. Media sometimes acts as a **default activity**, or a way to delay an unpleasant task, for example, homework. It can also provide something to do when nothing else seems available. Media can be used to satisfy **competitive** and aggressive desires by game playing with oneself or others. Some kids watch TV or surf the Internet for **educational** reasons. They are curious about a specific subject or want to learn a set of rules or manners outside of their own experiences. Teens also use media for **social** reasons, to **connect** and reconnect with present and past friends. Media can be used to share ideas and provide

highlights of past experiences through the sharing of photos and thoughts. Program content may spark a discussion about a film or TV show and offer a **socializing** medium for kids, similar to what adults identify as "water cooler behavior."

From a neuroscience perspective, media may function to plug into, and supply chemical links to, **brain structure**. McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message," helped us understand that the medium of television itself affects the structure of thought. Recent MRI and PET scan research is now validating this thesis, demonstrating the impact of media on a child's developing brain.

Most importantly, kids use media for **psychological** reasons. The media stories and characters they seek out and identify with are determined by their developmental level and personal psychology, just as the way they use technology reveals their inner selves. It is therefore imperative to have an understanding of certain psychological concepts.

Psychologically, kids **identify** with characters and certain shows that highlight their own psychodynamic issues (envy, sibling issues, shame, neglect, trauma) based on their developmental staging. Plugging into a program or character is deeper than imitation. The process is internal; it is a penetrating fit that the child locks onto and uses for his or her psychic benefit. Older children are more logical and have a harder time suspending disbelief, while younger kids cannot discriminate between fantasy and reality. Children under eight worry more about their parents leaving or dying (*Bambi*), while kids above eight may be more preoccupied with their own safety issues related to right and wrong and good and evil (*Star Wars*).

Psychology 101: A review

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was a neurologist and psychiatrist who studied hypnotism and nervous disorders. He

created the theory of **psychoanalysis**, which uses dreams, free associations, and the relationship between therapists and patients to understand patients' unconscious. He explained how our **unconscious** is filled with **primary process** material (seen, for example, in the content of dreams and **cartoons**), which is illogical, fragmented, and symbolic. Freud also described the steps of psychosexual development (progression of growth and maturity). This is a type of staging of individuals, where a child's inner psychology evolves as a result of the excitement of certain erotic zones (or body parts) connected to the early phases of childhood. This develops from the oral (infant) to anal to phallic stages, then through latency (school age) and adolescence. As a result of trauma (loss, neglect, disaster, abuse) humans become **fixated** at different stages. Thus, we associate with these body parts or zones, whereupon character traits and even **neuroses** are formed. For example, being fixated in the oral stage, as a result of loss of a caregiver, can lead to eating disorders. These various erogenous zones possess sexual prominence, and remnants of their power are always with us. Consider the power of a kiss on the mouth, or orality, at any age. As a result of these views on the possibility of childhood sexuality, Freud was harshly criticized and rejected by his medical colleagues.

Freud also considered the warring elements of the mind, which he divided topographically into the Id (sex and aggression, desires and impulses), the Ego (the main tool we use to deal with reality perception), and the Superego (our conscious or guilt mechanism).

Freud described **defense mechanisms** (denial, intellectualization, repression) as adaptive psychological devices to keep unpleasant thoughts related to sex and aggression out of our awareness. These mechanisms help us allay anxiety. For example, denial, or repression, are

mechanisms used to keep upsetting reality or memories hidden in the unconscious. These mechanisms are not necessarily pathological, and one, in particular, is most helpful when thinking about the media. This is **regression in the service of the ego.** This mechanism is adaptive, as we commonly use it when we are ill and curl up into a ball in our beds to ward off the world and isolate ourselves. More importantly we use it to suspend belief and reality. This enables us to "get into" and be part of a TV program, film, or novel.

Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was an artist, teacher, and author who had little medical background. He focused more on the importance of a human's social surroundings. He proposed **psychosocial stages or tasks of development** as opposed to Freud's psychosexual system. Erickson's stages go through adult life and are described as social tasks that must be accomplished for true psychological health. These stages include:

- Trust versus Mistrust (in infancy this is related to having needs of feeding and comfort met);
- Autonomy versus Shame (this is related to success in potty training);
- Initiative versus Guilt (how we assess ourselves as being active and not passive);
- Industry versus Inferiority (this can be gauged in terms of school-age success or failure); and
- Identity versus Identity Diffusion (this takes place during adolescence and is related to having a strong sense of who you are).

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss developmental psychologist who observed his own children and staged them in a complex manner by assessing their cognitive skills. His work is the basis for much of our educational system. The baby uses sensorimotor tasks, such as sucking, grasping, and

smiling, to form circular reflexes that connect thoughts and actions. These behaviors are part of a pre-logical (before age seven) state of thinking, where reality and fantasy merge: to young children, animals have and know their names, and inanimate objects like the moon are ruled by manmade forces. Language is still very generalized—saying "Mommy" can be used for any need—and the understanding of time is a mystery. Indeed, young children have no idea about whole and parts or hierarchies. The stage of concrete operations comes later, after age seven, when children come to understand groups, classes, and hierarchies. Finally, the child goes on to a stage of formal operations in adolescence as she then understands symbols, implications, metaphors, and consequences. Thus, he or she attains the ability to think abstractly, which leads to the ability to appreciate metaphors, theories, and philosophy.

Other psychological theorists and researchers we should briefly consider

Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) observed and measured thousands of children to devise objective norms and milestones related to childhood. For instance, children hold their heads up at three months, stand at one year, and have close to a fifty-word vocabulary at one and a half years.

John Bowlby (1907-1990) wrote about the importance of **attachment** (solid, stable connection) to the mother or another care giver at a young age.

Donald Winnicott (1896-1971) described the importance of the "good enough mother" and **transitional space** where kids learn to develop a sense of self. Winnicott is also well known for studying the concept of the "**transitional object,**" the child's special toy, usually a soft teddy bear or other plush animal figure. The smell and texture of this object is very

important, and it represents the external world of the first "not me," or mother object.

The Basics: What Is the Media?

1. Two elements of children's programs are _____ and _____.
2. Children shows almost never have content related to _____ or _____.
3. Children watch TV for _____ and _____ reasons.
4. According to the author, the most important reason that kids watch TV is _____.
5. Who was Freud?
6. How does Erickson differ from Freud in terms of staging life cycle milestones?
7. Whom did Piaget observe to formulate his cognitive theory?
8. Two reflexes described in Piaget's sensorimotor stage are _____ and _____.
9. Winnicott is associated with the concept of the "_____ _____ _____."

CHAPTER TWO

"SAY, KIDS! WHAT TIME IS IT?": EARLY CHILDREN'S MEDIA

Remembering lying in bed, curled up with your favorite stuffed animal under soft covers with the lights dimmed, listening to your mom read about the plight of Hansel and Gretel, evokes a feeling of comfort and security. It also may have been scary, as fairy tales do have elements of abandonment, violence, trauma, and envy. The brothers Grimm were grim indeed, but parents had executive control over the story lines, as they were the readers, changing language and content, thus making it developmentally appropriate and easy for sleepy-time. Parents used to be the masters of the messages of the fairy-tale medium.

After "once upon a time," and before electronic messages filled their lives, children also read to themselves. Magazines like *Boys' Life* and *Junior Scholastic* offered kids a pleasurable escape. Children also read actual books, like *Treasure Island, Robin Hood*, and *Peter Pan.* Early in the twentieth century, kids looked forward to the "funnies" and the latest adventures of *Terry and the Pirates*, *Don Winslow*, and *Mandrake*. These weekly, colorful pages—which, with the *Yellow Kid* and *Buster Brown*, were originally used to sell newspapers—soon evolved into booklet-length stories, then into the "comic book."

Comic books had their Golden Age of great artists, storytellers, and superheroes, beginning in 1937 with *Superman* and then *Batman*, who were respectively introduced in *Action*

Comics #1 (1938) and *Detective Comics #27* (1939). These colorful stories, told through square frames and balloon-enclosed dialogues, became the fairy tales of the twentieth century, with good versus evil, magical powers, and alternate identities. Revenue from comic books grew, not just from their cover price, but because their colorful pages marketed all kinds of products, from toys to the Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension system.

Those word-filled balloons in comics were my own first venture into reading. I would gladly run the two blocks to the only newsstand in the neighborhood that sold my grandfather's beloved *Wall Street Journal* because the latest DC comic was there, which was my reward for the trip. When EC Comics came out with *Weird Science* and *Weird Fantasy*, with their beautifully illustrated stories by authors like Ray Bradbury, I was in heaven as I devoured their pages.

Radio

All this changed with the arrival of radio. Content on radio was first all music, then added news. The sinking of the Titanic in 1912 drove radio into public awareness. Sports followed, then comedy with Bob Hope and Jack Benny, and eventually soaps and dramas. It was only later that children's shows made their appearance. Radio was a mass-produced, national medium as local stations gave way to whole networks that crossed the entire country. CBS sold advertising and NBC sold content for big bucks. Radio provided an aura of nostalgia for old-fashioned storytelling, fostering links connected to our imaginations and memory. Radio arrived at a time in our nation's history when we were looking for a national character. It gave us a means of cohesion, as we, the audience, listened to the same programs, which seemed to unite the country. This new medium also allowed us to be entertained in the privacy of our own homes. We didn't have

to be pushed, shoved, or even dressed to enjoy drama and comedy. It was so easy to use, with dials for on/off, station, and volume. Perfect for those "downtimes for kids," it became a break for parents. As a babysitter, radio spoke to children in a way that entertained and engaged them.

I can remember coming in from play (this is in an era when kids went outside), tired from the rigors of street hockey or stickball competition, cold and hungry, succumbing to the atmosphere of my overheated apartment and the odors of my mom's cooking. I was sluggish, but had just enough energy to reach up and turn on that magical appliance and hear, "Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear… The Lone Ranger rides again!"

Radio was made for kids. It was an easy way to convey a story, and children's radio stories were terrific: Captain Midnight, Tom Mix, Little Orphan Annie, Sergeant Preston, and Superman. With creative, realistic sound effects, skilled Broadway actors, and a sense of drama, radio fed directly into a child's imagination. It encouraged the child to associate the radio sounds with their own self-created visual images. What a remarkable cognitive exercise for a ten-year-old during this period, asked to visualize Superman flying and to revel in his ability "to leap tall buildings in a single bound"!

Radio's appeal goes back to a pre-literate, oral mode of communication. For children it was similar to being read to. It was private, as you visualized the stories being told to you in your mind's eye. As radio gained popularity and became a part of every child's life, its commercial effectiveness was soon realized. Buster Brown shoes, Ovaltine (a chocolate food supplement), Wheaties, and Kix were all identified with the characters of the programs they sponsored. Premiums ("Send only one box top. . .") intensified the bond among characters, consumers, spy rings, and breakfast cereals. Imagine deciphering a code sent by none other than Captain Midnight!

The hard work, honesty, discipline, and courage of radio characters like the Green Hornet and Jack Armstrong plugged into a child's psyche at a time in life when, as Erikson explains, personal industry was needed to overcome feelings of inferiority. Characters like the Shadow and the Lone Ranger, with their dual identities, fought evil, at the same time as eight-year-olds battled bad thoughts. The secret identities, codes, and hideouts of radio's heroes mirrored a child's first secret thoughts about sex and anger. The themes of loyalty and deception appealed in no small way to conflicts a ten-year-old might be having with respect to friends and family. Magical powers, like flying and X-ray vision, tapped into **primary process thinking,** which was seductive for an otherwise powerless nine-year-old. Radio recycled the most successful comic book characters and gave them voices and an even greater stage, a proscenium where children's imaginations could run free.

Movie Serials

In an effort to fill their theatres at off-times and create a children's market for movies, the serial—or short adventure film—was introduced. Made predominantly by Republic Studios, these low budget "cliffhangers," so called because each film episode ended with the hero facing near-disaster, urged us to come back next week to see what happened. During the forties, Flash Gordon, Bull Dog Drummond, and Tim Tyler defied fire, guns, crashes, and interplanetary wars only to appear in the following week's installment.

Saturday afternoon at the local movie palace belonged to the kids. This was before TV's Saturday morning programming, and a step toward the use of media to socially control and babysit children. Parents at this time were not as interested in having athletic, academically advanced, musical, and popular children as are the parents of today. Indeed, an

afternoon at the movies is now sometimes considered a waste. Parents in the forties and fifties were only interested in their kids being safe and well fed.

I still remember the smells of wet wool and sardines emanating from my provision-packed friends, stifling in too-warm clothes, around me while we were at the movies. I recall the screaming as Flash Gordon was about to be destroyed again by Ming the Merciless. While this was exciting, and the characters were now made even more real by appearing on a big screen, something was lost in having the movies put it all before me. I could no longer visualize my own images of the action found in the books I read or the programs I listened to. The mind's eye of imagination had become extraneous, in preparation for the arrival, setting the table for television.

TV

Early television was developed at RCA and Dumont and shown by RCA at the New York World's Fair in 1939. Television was seen originally as a threat to Hollywood and caused the big film studios not to invest in TV station licenses. As a result, the radio networks took control of TV. With the development of the cathode tube and the use of selenium, televisions became cheaper. But to sell these new electronic miracles, programming had to be provided. Early TV included wrestling, comedians, and great drama.

Like radio, children's shows came later and were merely a recycling, of old Western movies and serials. As the "babysitting potential" of the lighted box began to dawn on parents, the reality of a children's market alerted advertisers; thus. kids' shows evolved. *The Magic Cottage*, *Lucky Pup*, and *Rudy Kazootie* all used animals, theme songs, puppets, sponsored contests, and commercials for cereal, candy, and shoes.

Drama was soon introduced, with *Captain Video* in 1949. He battled an evil Dr. Pauley in space for control of the universe. Science fiction, which stressed the popular theme of world apocalypse in the fifties, was enhanced by our nation's fears of an atomic attack by the "Reds" and the absurd "take cover" drills youngsters were subjected to at school. But there was also plenty of room for old standbys like Hopalong Cassidy, who fought cattle rustlers and other bad guys in the Wild West.

Being alone in the basement of Wanamaker's department store in downtown New York, where Captain Video was produced, was a big thrill for me. Then, unfortunately, I peered into the Space Viewer of the Video Ranger's space ship and lost some of my eleven-year-old innocence, as I saw not stars and planets, but the floor.

Howdy Doody

Without a doubt the number-one kids' show was Howdy Doody. The show is interesting for several reasons, including the way the "Peanut Gallery"—the show's studio audience of forty children—was selected and the producers' demands that there should be "no crying please" while the show was on the air. This directive became more complicated because young kids often start crying when separated from their parents. Indeed, my own experience of being brought to the show by indulgent aunts was rather shocking. There I was on the set, and all I could think about was seeing Howdy live. But all I saw was a piece of dirty cloth, connected to string. And, to make matters worse, he was sloppily thrown over the back of a chair. I remember having to control my tears. If I screamed, as I wanted to, there would be no Peanut Gallery for me.

Howdy Doody had puppets, clowns, Indians, cowboys, and over-the-top commercialism. The selling of products related to the show began in 1949, when Western Printing offered a