

MEMORANDUM

To: Michael Levine, Joan Ganz Cooney Center
Fr: Vicky Rideout, Kaiser Family Foundation
Re: Media Multitasking
Dt: June 15, 2009

This memo is in response to your request for some thoughts about the issues to be explored at your forum on media multitasking at Stanford in a couple of weeks.

As you know, the issue of media multitasking is one that has been of interest to the Foundation for quite some time. In the late 90s, as we were designing our first media use study (*Kids and Media @ The New Millennium*, published in 1999), we decided to try to measure media multitasking for two reasons: first, so we could have a sense of the total amount of time young people spend with media (if we simply added up the times spent with each medium, we'd be vastly over-estimating the number of hours out of their day spent with media); and second, so we could get an idea of how prevalent and frequent media multitasking actually was.

One issue for academics and other researchers is the methodology for measuring media multitasking. As you know, the method the Foundation settled on was to collect a large sample of media-use diaries – week-long diaries from about 700 respondents. Using this method, we were able to calculate a percent of total media use time that is spent media multitasking. We used this methodology in the data collected during 1998/99 and again in data collected during 2003/4 and released in our 2005 report *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds*, and our 2006 report *Media Multitasking Among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors and Pairings*. I'm attaching a one page Key Findings document from the 2006 report on multitasking.

As you may recall, we found a substantial increase in the proportion of media use time spent multitasking between the two periods of data collection – from 16% in the first wave, to 26% in the second. We have just completed the third wave of data collection and expect to have updated findings on media use among young people – including multitasking – in early 2010.

The topics I would be interested in having addressed at your event include:

- Can/should other researchers develop other methodologies for measuring media multitasking, besides those used by Kaiser, to test our results? I suspect there's a lot of room for improvement!
- Does media multitasking contribute to a need for constant multi-platform stimulation, and is it somehow detrimental to cultivating the ability of young people to concentrate and focus deeply when they need to?

- How can public health organizations most effectively reach young people who are media multitaskers with public education campaigns? How do you penetrate the media din, and get young people's attention?
- Is there some reason we should care about the fact that many young people are consuming more than one entertainment medium at the same time? Why does it matter? (I understand why it matters to commercial advertisers trying to get their attention; and I understand why it might matter to the artists who are creating the entertainment content; but I'm not sure why it should matter to anyone else if a young person likes to keep the music on in the background while they play a video game.)
- What proportion of young people's media use is informational or learning-oriented? I suspect it's a miniscule amount. In that sense, I wonder whether media multitasking really has much of an effect on learning.
- Most of the multitasking research I've seen does not involve media – it involves trying to conduct two cognitive activities at the same time, which strikes me as inherently different from reading with the TV or radio on in the background. What research is there that is specifically focused on the effects of media multitasking on comprehension and retention?
- Can we design qualitative research that would effectively explore how media multitasking usually works, in terms of the focus of the user's attention – is one medium primarily deep background and the other in the front of the user's consciousness?

Thanks Michael – looking forward to the event!