

Children & Media Multitasking – Possible Important Issues

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(Note: these issues are not presented in any order of importance)

1. Obtain a solid fix on how much media multitasking occurs (as well as its nature).
 - A. Most data on the extent of young people's media multitasking comes from the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) survey's of young people's media use, one of the few studies that has attempted to measure concurrent use of two or more media. Unfortunately, because media multitasking was not the primary focus of the KFF studies, there remain questions about how much media multitasking occurs (as well as which media are more or less likely to be multitasked). All KFF estimates refer to concurrent use of "two or more media," leaving us with little or no data on the extent to which youths use three, four, or more media concurrently. The result is that current estimates of exposure time may be quite conservative.
 - B. Estimates of the proportion of media time devoted to multiple media is based on self-selected samples of young people who maintained media activity diaries for a week. The KFF diary samples account for a little over half of the original sample of youngsters who completed the primary media behavior surveys. Although preliminary comparisons indicate that the diary samples are roughly equivalent to the survey samples, there is nevertheless reason to wonder if youth most likely to complete the diaries are those more "connected" to media (i.e., engage in more media use), therefore more (or less?) likely to engage in media multitasking.
2. Clarify what we mean by "*media* multitasking."
 - A. Initially, media multitasking referred to concurrent use of multiple media with "media referring to particular delivery systems (e.g., reading a magazine while listening to music; watching television and reading a newspaper simultaneously). However, as new communication technologies have evolved, the media multitasking concept seems to have morphed so that it often means "message multitasking." For example, children who engage in several computer activities concurrently (e.g., concurrent instant messaging and game playing), or teenagers who process several different message streams while watching television (e.g., following an ESPN broadcast of a particular game *and* reading updates of other games or sports as they scroll across the bottom of the screen), are not using several media simultaneously. Rather, they are using one medium but processing multiple messages. This distinction is potentially important.

- B. Explore/clarify the role of “message type” in media multitasking. Messages may vary on a number of dimensions. For example, they can vary in terms of degree of “personalness” (i.e., from private, interpersonal messages to public, mass messages); they can vary in terms of channel or code similarity (e.g., two voices speaking in different ears vs. one voice and one written note – see C below); they can vary in terms of content (e.g., two news stories a la a cable news channel with a scroll across the bottom; a TV news story and a computer game; fiction v. non-fiction; etc.). Do any of these dimensions make a difference in the likelihood or efficiency of media multitasking?
- C. A dimension on which we need particular clarification is the extent to which we use “medium” to refer to a particular encoding process (channel?) as opposed to a delivery system. That is, the type of code that is characteristic of a particular medium (print, visual/iconic, aural) probably plays an important role in the likelihood and efficiency of media multitasking. We often tend to confound this use of medium with media delivery system. The problem becomes particularly acute when we are concerned with delivery systems that employ multiple codes simultaneously (e.g., computers’ or television’s simultaneous use of print, pictures, and sound; could their central roles in media multitasking stem from the fact that it is easier to “multitask” separate codes?).
3. To what extent does the convergence of media into single systems or devices that can deliver all forms of communication codes simultaneously (e.g., laptop computers; cell phones), require reconceptualization of what we mean by “media multitasking?”
4. What is the role of interactivity in media multitasking. That is, to the extent that the computer has become a (the?) center of media multitasking (see Foehr, 2006), to what extent is this because of the opportunity to combine processing of “mass” (non-personal) messages with personal comment. In terms of media multitasking, should a mix of personal and non-personal messages be considered equal to a mix of either kind alone?

Foehr, Ulla G. (2006) *Media Multitasking among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors, and Pairings* (Menlo Park, Calif.: Kaiser Family Foundation); also see Ulla G. Foehr, “Media Multitasking among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors, and Pairings” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif., 2006).