CHILDREN & THE CHANGE OF THEIR MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

A NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY 2007-2016.

A FINAL REPORT 2018

RESEARCH PROJECT

Children and the Change of their Media Environment is a national longitudinal study on children´s media use and media environment, funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation.
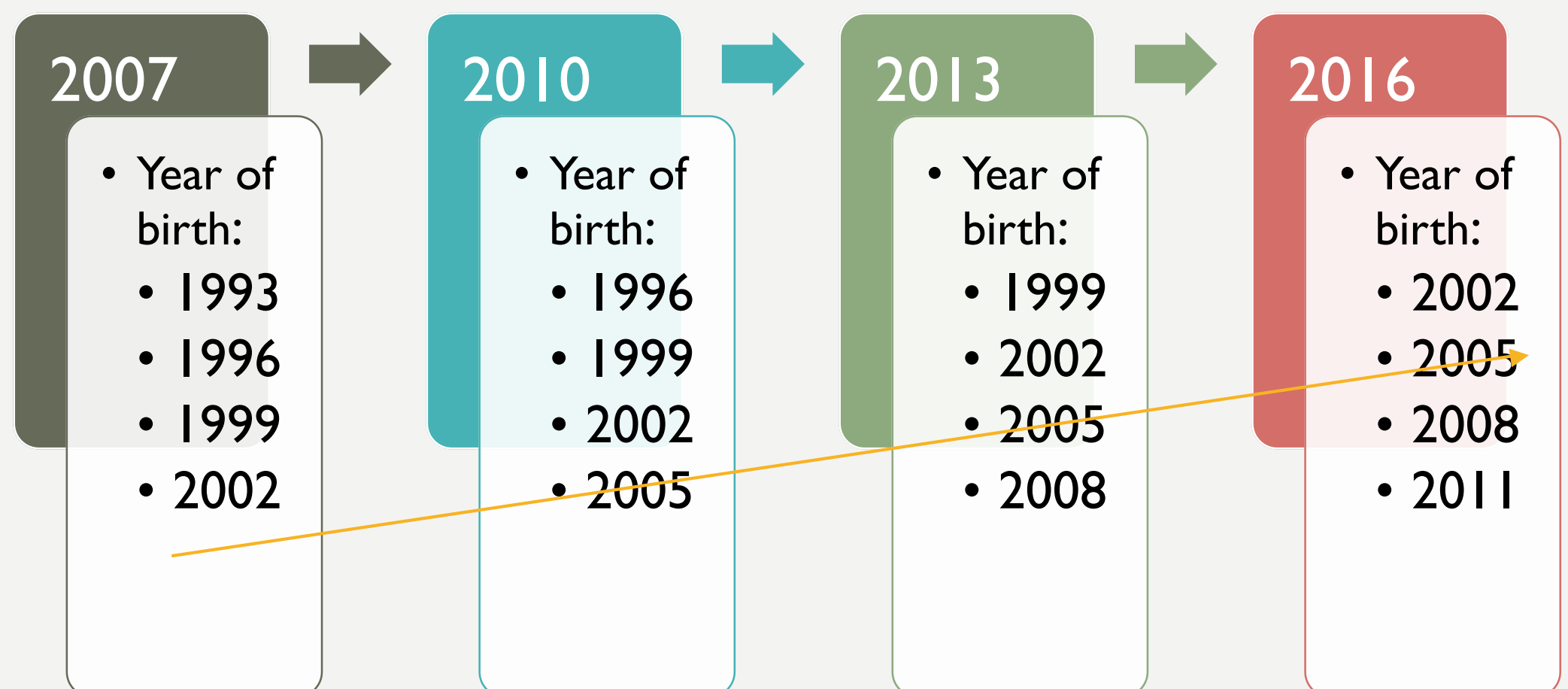
The project was repeated four times between 2007 and 2016. The study was conducted in three year intervals among 5-, 8-, 11- and 14-year old children and young people. The sample was about 45-60 children in each research year. Every research year a new group of 5-year-old children participated and the former participants from each age group moved to the next age group. So the ones who came along in 2007 as 5-year-olds were 8 year in 2010 and 11 year in 2013, and they were followed throughout the study until they were 14 year old in 2016.

As the name of the research project reveals, *change* was the key concept of the research. Obviously, the individual change in children's media use is very much part of a continuous order of growth. Children go through changes in their media use from parentally supervised media use to more social and independent media use of their own. However, the research setting enabled to examine changes in children´s media environment as well and compare how, for example, 14-year-old uses and describes his/her media landscape in 2007 and 2016.

To avoid the hype, often connected to so called "digital natives", we looked at what kinds of media experiences and media use seemed to prevail from year to year among same age groups of children. It´s good to remember the concurrency of change and continuity in media environments. Established technologies or media routines are very rarely totally displaced by the new ones. By contrast people adopt new habits gradually and new devices are used in relation to older. In people´s everyday life there are lots of elements that maintain continuity and there is a risk in the digital generation debate to confuse life-stage behaviors with genuine historical change. Adults, who control and construct the public discourse about (online) youth, often fall into exoticization of so called net generation:

During the first research year, certain themes for observation were firmed up. In each research year, the researchers paid attention how change (or continuity) was present in the following areas:
- Home environment, including media devices and times of use
- Social media environment, including participating in content production.
- Cultural and commercial media environment, including favorite contents, brands and advertising.
- Media competence and media literacy, including parent´s attitudes and the rules set by the parents.

| 2007	2010	2013	2016
• Year of birth:	• Year of birth:	• Year of birth:	• Year of birth:
• 1993	• 1996	• 1999	• 2002
• 1996	• 1999	• 2002	• 2005
• 1999	• 2002	• 2005	• 2008
• 2002	• 2005	• 2008	• 2011

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- The research emphasizes the *voice* and the agency of children themselves: the theoretical framework can be found on the sociology of children. Over the last few decades, there has been a relatively strong consensus in childhood sociology on the fact that research should represent children's own perspectives or voice. The sociology of childhood emphasizes children as capable social actors and the best experts on their own life and opposes the old understanding which considered children more like 'human becomings' and future adults instead of individual 'beings'.

- In research, this paradigm is addressed using expressions like doing research *with* children (instead of *on* children) *listening* to children, *child-centred* research or children as *co-researchers*. In this frame children were recognized as cultural actors and childhood is understood mainly as a cultural construct.

- However, the concept of children's voice is obviously ambiguous. Critics have stated that research can never mediate an 'authentic' child's voice because it is always created in a dialogic process with a researcher. Voice is an ongoing social process of *exchanging* narratives. Thus, voice always involves speaking and listening. In this project, children´s voice is understood as socially grounded, performed through exchange and subject to power struggles and social roles.

METHODS & DATA

- The families taking part in the study were required to commit to the longitudinal study for a lengthy time period. We recruited participants from schools and day care centres both in the city centre and in peripheral areas. We managed to reach mainly middle or upper class families who were interested in media education. This became evident in background questionnaires concerning the parents' education, income and the media equipment at home.

- As children have different capabilities and strengths, several methods were used so that every participant could find the best possible way for self-expression. In addition, the research conversations were conducted for the most part in children's own bedrooms, which helped to use children's material environment as an information source and cultural text.

- One task was to evaluate suitable methods for children´s research. Each method has challenges. For example in research conversations, the researcher has to gain children´s trust and remember that child-adult relations and spatial practices affect children´s talk. Despite the fact that we used several methods, written or spoken language remained the dominant form of communication.

- **Following methods were used:**

- Background questionnaires for children and their parents;

- Imagery of different media devices for 5-year-olds to illustrate the concept of 'media';

- Media diaries;

- Media assignments (e.g. drawings, photographs);

- Toys (media mascot for 5-year-olds);

- Observation;

- Anonymous web survey for 11- and 14-year-olds;

- Research conversations with children.
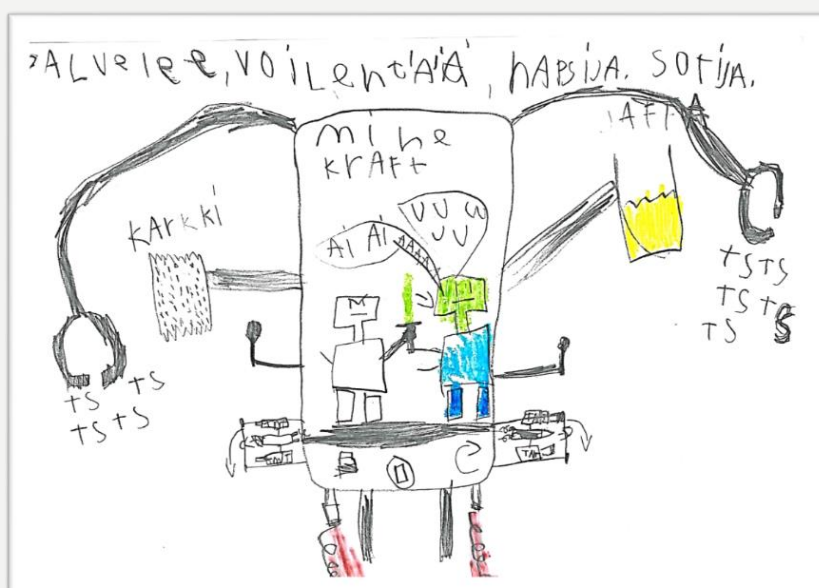
FINDINGS

At the turn of the 2010s, the project produced unique data of children and young people, who can be described as the first true social media generation. Between the years 2007 and 2016, rather rapid change took place in relation to mobile technologies and social media. The true mobile shift occurred in 2013, when laptops displaced table computers in homes. Children started to have their own smartphones, which increased their independence and at the same time made the monitoring of their media use more difficult.

According to the parents, they were fully aware of what media content their 5-year-olds were using, but 8-year-olds challenged their parents and arguing, for example, on playing became common at homes. Very rarely parents knew what their 11- and 14-year-olds were doing with their smartphones.

By each research year, children started to use internet a bit younger. In Finland, children usually start using internet before they hit the milestone of two years. In 2016 all 5-year-old research participants of this study used internet independently whereas in 2007 independent use among the youngest age group was rather rare.

During the research years, mobile internet and technological convergence has changed the way how research on media use can be carried out. As children use all kinds of media content through their phones, it has become increasingly difficult to estimate, for example, how long they´ve watched video content or played online games. Thus, media has became increasingly ubiquitous and intertwined in the everyday life of children.

At the same time, there has been a steady decrease in literary reading, and subscriptions of newspapers and magazines. Playing all kinds of online or mobile games has become mainstream form of entertainment for both girls and boys.

FINDINGS

- Children and young people are quick to adapt new platforms and application following their friends, but are also quick to abandon them.

- Young people are looking for media spaces without adults and parental control. For example, the popularity of Facebook started to rapidly decrease when parents and adults started to join the service. In the year 2016, Facebook was mainly used only to keep in touch with relatives and "stalking" other users.

- WhatsApp has replaced Facebook messenger and SMS messages. Majority of the young people belonged to tens of WhatsApp groups.

- The online platforms and services are closely connected to life offline. Strict separation between online and offline spaces is artificial.

- Upholding online presence in several group and networks is time-consuming, because one is expected to provide likes and comments.

- Even though the favourite platforms and services of children and young people are sometimes rapidly changing, the basic funtions of media usage are slower to change.

- Children and young people want to keep in touch with their friends easily and in real time and media platforms are also important in communication and constructing cohesion between family members. In 2016 many families had one or more WhatsApp group.

- Media is used to kill time and spending time together in home, on leisure time and in school.

- Children and young people aged 14 years are primarily looking for entertainment, fun content and good feelings from media.

- Media is also used to obtain information related to school assignements and hobbies.

- The big news events were rarely mentioned in the interviews, on the other hand for example the school shootings or refugee crisis of 2015 did not took place on the years that interviews were conducted.
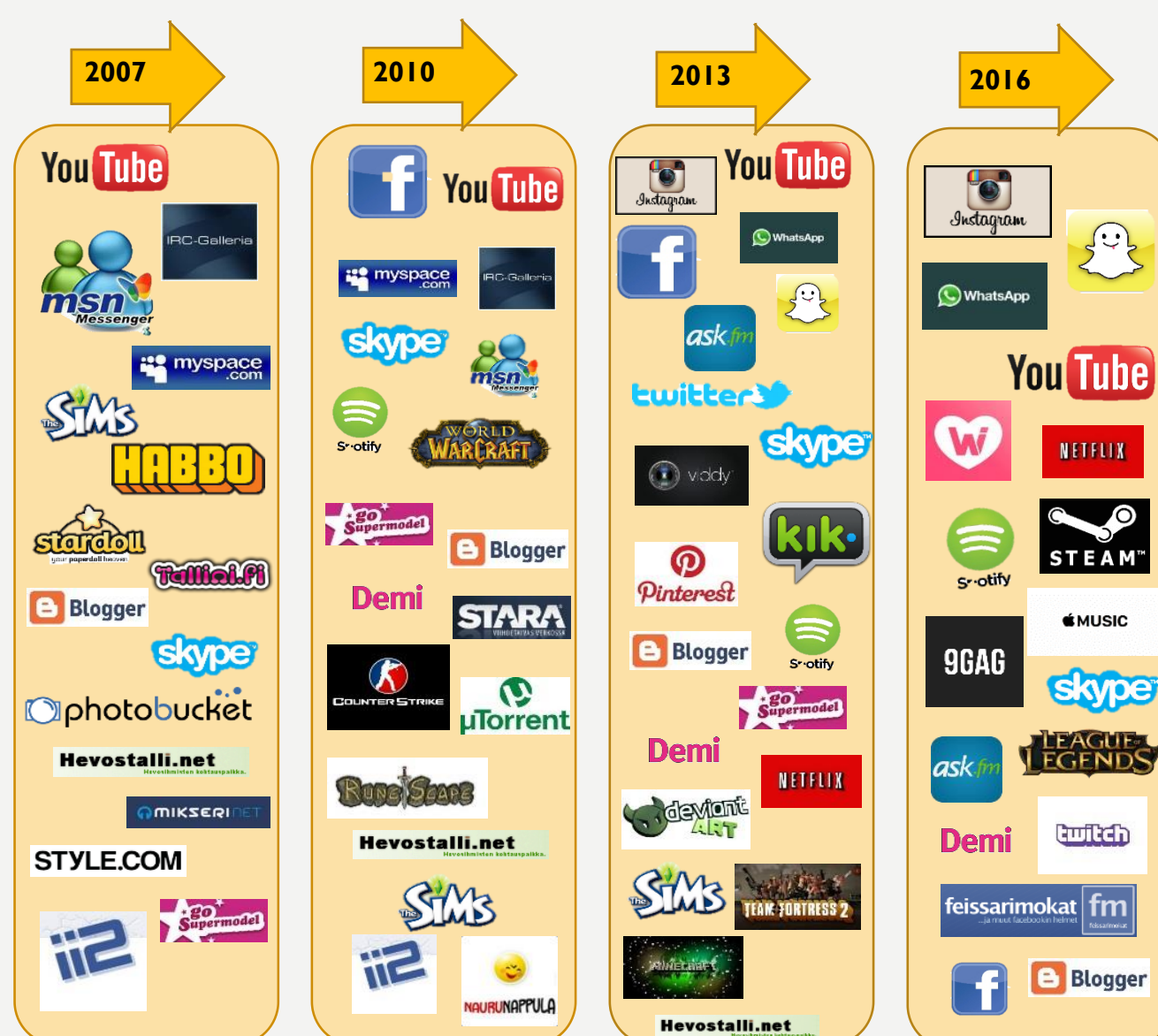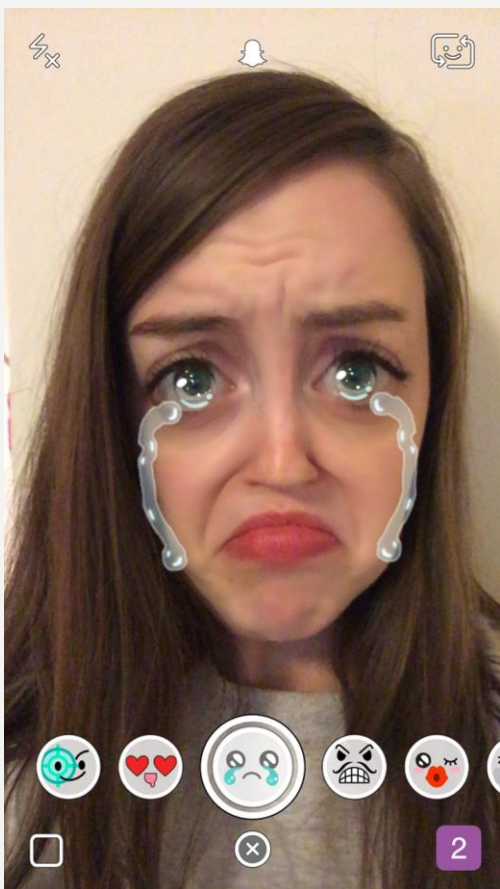
FINDINGS

- During the reserach years the Internet became increasingly visual medium. The popularity of content produced by peers rose immensely.

- In 2016 popular vloggers on Youtube gained tens of thousands of followers becaming popular idols for children and young people. Many teenagers dreamed about becoming Youtube celebritites themselves.

- The standards of peer production have risen. In 2010 online publishing was mainly aimed close circle of friends and it was done for self-expression and fun, where as in 2016 even 11 year olds were concerned about their image and contemplated on how to acquire more followers. However, it is important to note that all children are not producing media content themselves and majority of content production is still limited to sharing and commenting images. Communicating via images is developing into a new language where selfie is replied with another selfie.
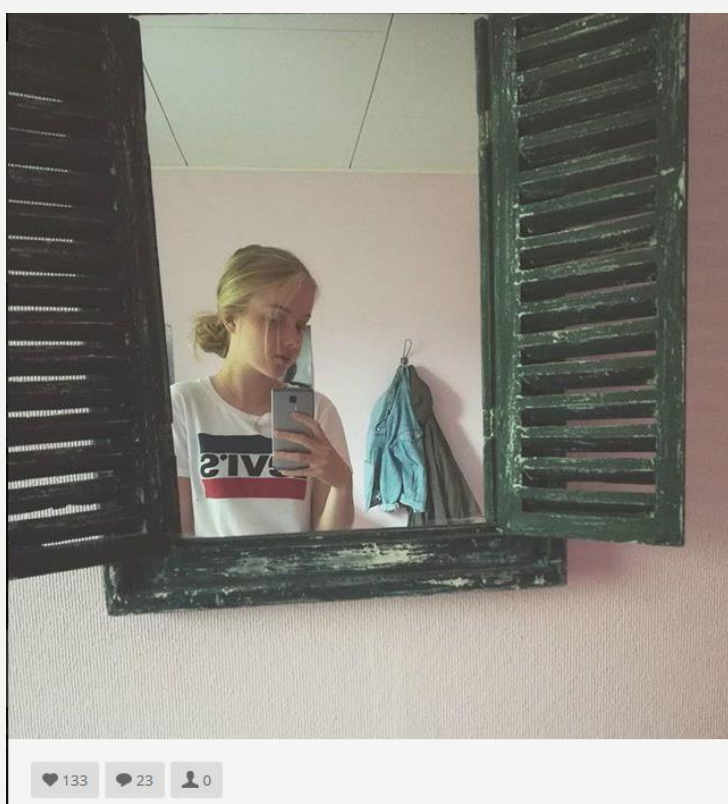
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