

Exploring Children's Ability to Employ Media and Information Literacy Assessments: Insights From the Podcast Kids Talk Media

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This article reflects on my professional practice in producing and hosting the podcast series Kids Talk Media (<https://kidstalkmedia.net/>). The podcast explores children's understanding of the influence of media on their lives using a unique interpersonal approach. During each podcast, two best friends discuss these issues with an adult host, myself. The host guides the discussion, but the topics, insights, concerns, and transgressions shared are driven by the children. More than 20 episodes have been produced with the release of new episodes ongoing. A few of the children interviewed convey a clear understanding of digital media and media and information literacy (MIL), and their comments demonstrate that they bring a critical lens to their consumption of media, including social media, video games, and even personal digital assistants such as Alexa. Other interviewees consume media without understanding, adult guidance, and concern for privacy or mental health. This article introduces readers to specific episodes and uses the children's utterances to demonstrate how MIL is helping them navigate their digital world, or how its omission is enabling them to blindly engage with media that affects their self-image, friendships, education, and future. This chapter will help teachers, practitioners, and other individuals developing MIL interventions for children to thoughtfully consider the extent of children's understanding of MIL and how to best empower their positive use of media.

Keywords: children's media; media and information literacy; explicit lyrics; parental media rules; Alexa; TikTok; YouTube.

“There are kindergartners at our school that have phones. I can’t have one till I’m 12. I don’t think you’re allowed to (bring it to school) but people do it anyway and the teachers don’t catch them,” said Christopher, aged 10 years, in a podcast entitled Kids Talk Media. This podcast, which I have been producing for the past few years, is basically a conversation between two children who are close friends and an adult host, myself. The conversation focuses on the role and influence of media in the lives of children. We discuss the media they enjoy, the media that worries them, and, occasionally, media they simply wish they could get permission to use.

This article discusses the development and production of the podcast series and conducts an analysis of findings based on the podcast. The article begins with an explanation of why the study selected the method of a podcast and the early development of Kids Talk Media; I then explain the Guiding Principles of the podcast and follow with an analysis of comments from the children interviewed for the podcast using specific quotes. Although the lives of the children interviewed differ from the details, such as school grade, family structure, or favorite media, they share common themes. This article explores these common themes as well as their differences.

In this paper, media refers to digital and non-digital media; video games, apps, television shows, books, music, movies, personal digital assistants, virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and the metaverse. As a media and information literacy (MIL) educator, I am interested in exploring the media environments of children. What types of media are children selecting? How well do they understand the implications of such choices? Do they consider MIL concepts informally as they select and consume media? What guides their media choices? In what way do these choices create positive and/or negative experiences? The method through which I chose to gain insights to these questions was a podcast.

Why a Podcast?

In my work, surprisingly, researchers, producers, and even parents frequently tell me that they do not spend time with children. Furthermore, when they spend time with children, they have an end goal in mind. Typically, adults, such as parents and teachers, are instructing children on how and when to consume media and which media is right for them. In my conversations and workshops with parents and educators, they typically express the belief that children could not possibly make wise media choices for themselves. However, why would children share personal thoughts about media with adults, when adults are unlikely to listen with an open mind and may even punish children for inappropriate use? Thus, children conceal and may lie about their media use. To gain insights on children and media, parents and MIL educators need to listen to children. The lack of access to unfiltered conversations with children can lead parents and educators to beliefs and decisions that do not align with the lived experiences of children. This scenario recently occurred when a parent of one of the children interviewed for the podcast emphatically told me that his daughter had never been on TikTok and YouTube and had no access to these platforms. He shared this thought after hearing his daughter in the podcast provide details about her TikTok and YouTube media use. Children are provided few opportunities to discuss the influence of media in their lives in environments in which adults listen without judgment.

Compared with children, adults are certainly more capable of making informed choices on many topics and weighing visible and invisible potential outcomes, ethical choices, and financial implications. Even a consensus exists that adults make better decisions for children than children would make on their own, the reality is that children are not with their parents all the time. In terms of media consumption, children frequently make decisions in the absence of parents and, likely, of any adult. This reality is confirmed in nearly every episode of the podcast I have produced. Children's access to media has exponentially grown as devices have become increasingly small, portable, and affordable. Hiding the contents that children choose to stream, play, listen to, or download is easy. Children today have numerous opportunities to consume media alone or with someone apart from responsible adults.

Thus, how could I create a space in which children share their media consumption and thoughts? The answer was an audio podcast.

A podcast is a form of digital media, an audio program available online or through an app (Pot, 2013). It may be a series of episodes or a single program and may be live or available as pre-recordings. According to Statista (2022), 26% of the United States population listens to at least one podcast per week, which is an increase from 7% in 2013, and the percentage continues to grow.

To encourage children to share honest, authentic responses, I needed to create a space in which children would feel comfortable to share their thoughts, i.e., an open, unstructured, and friendly space without adults (apart from me). An audio podcast affords such an environment. In a video recording, an interviewee is typically conscious of the camera and is apt to perform; audio recordings only use a small microphone and a recording device and, thus, easily out of sight and mind. The recording device can be placed unobtrusively, which enables the interviewees, children, to focus on the conversation and their friend instead of on the technology. The convenience of the technology enables producers to select interview locations that are comfortable to the children being interviewed, such as their bedroom or a family room in their home.

The Kids Talk Media podcast premiered February 2019 and has been in production since then. As of the writing of this article, I have produced 22 episodes. I have interviewed children while they did cartwheels across their living room, shared a TikTok dance, taught me a video game, sang a Disney song, and accidentally woke up Alexa, the digital assistant from Amazon. The podcast began before the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world indoors and dramatically increased the number of hours that children spent online (Henderson et al., 2023). Production paused at the start of the pandemic and resumed when it was again possible to conduct interviews in person. I have interviewed children in the United States, Brazil, England, and Australia. When recording a podcast, I aim to create a space in which children feel they are talking to a friend instead of an adult host. I intend to create an environment for casual conversation in which friends encourage one another to share funny stories or difficult memories.

Guiding Principles for Kids Talk Media

The abovementioned considerations led to the creation of an informal list of principles for the podcast, which I refer to as the Guiding Principles. The objective is to ensure that children feel physically and emotionally comfortable. The Guiding Principles are as follows:

- Record audio only; no video, which enables the equipment to remain small and unobtrusive.
- Assure them that no adults can overhear the conversation during recording.
- Conduct the interview in a child-friendly space, i.e., on their *turf*, such as their bedroom or a playroom of the child's choosing.
- Stop recording when the children have lost interest.
- Allow the conversation to naturally evolve and flow where the children want it to go; don't be overly directive.
- Assure the children that no right or wrong answers exist; whatever they say is acceptable, and the podcast is not a test.
- Protect the child's privacy; use first names only, no mention of school name or the names of siblings or towns.
- Focus on their enjoyment of media as well as concerns.
- Highlight opinions. Differentiate between their opinions versus those of their parents or other adults.
- Listen without judgment, but do not refrain from offering other perspectives for them to consider.
- Respect the child.

To assess the MIL messages conveyed by the children interviewed, I utilize the definition of media literacy from the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, 2023): media literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and then act using all forms of communication.” In what ways did the children discuss their ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media? I further define each area according to focus as follows, which originated with the definitions provided by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2023):

- Access: availability and consumption; to retrieve or obtain;
- Analyze: seeking meaning; to examine in detail;
- Evaluate: assessing value; to judge quality; and
- Create: new and original; to bring something into existence.

The podcast specifically focuses on the media use of children; thus, the concept of access lies at the heart of our conversations. What media can they access at home, school, or a friend's house? However, the conversations exceed access, such that I pose the question of what ways are children

analyzing, evaluating, and creating media? And how do these behaviors encourage action? Consider this example from Patrick (11 years old; Season 1, Episode 5). He is discussing the media literacy concept evaluate when he shares the following:

I find it (media) to be overbearing, because it's everywhere and I think us as humans, we don't really need this much technology. We can survive without it.

He is considering his use of technology and the manner in which it effects his life. In other words, he is *evaluating* its impact. In the same episode, Patrick's friend Jackie (11 years old) shares the following:

If I had an hour I would record a video, I would edit it, make cool effects to it, because me and my sister have a YouTube channel ... it makes me find out new things because when I'm older I want to do things like that As we started posting more, we started gaining more subscribers and then we put more videos up there.

Her statement reflects a clear understanding of the steps required for creating a video. Her understanding of the function of the video's popularity in gaining subscribers also reflects the ability to analyze. Peyton (9 years old; Season 1, Episode 1) reflects the media literacy theme evaluate:

I don't like YouTube because I feel like they have a lot of negative opinions and some of the videos on there can be inappropriate and aren't really meant for kids.

The methods children use to reflect on their media use substantially vary. However, a common thread is that when they evaluate, they allow themselves to consume inappropriate media, while they hold others accountable for their inappropriate choices. Their comments reflect a discerning understanding of the influence of media, even if they are not always using such insights to guide personal choices. Brahin (12 years old; Season 1, Episode 2) is using social media but reflects his disdain for its use:

Social media — like you don't have anything else to do with your life and you just look at other people's things and then wonder how better their life is than yours.

The children frequently mention TikTok when they want to provide an example of inappropriate content. Scout (11 years old; Season 2, Episode 5) evaluates TikTok when she recognizes that certain contents are intended for older people but watches anyway:

There's not inappropriate things on TikTok cause TikTok bans them and takes them off, but there's some funny things that I just don't think are funny. There's some funny things that may use curse words, but I don't think they're inappropriate just that they're older and it's ok for them.

Revealing Comments and Concerns

During the conversations, children often divulge media details that they have not shared with their parents. They may be concerned that they have done something that may upset their parents or concerned that they will be punished for their actions. Their greatest concern is that if parents find out, then they will be unable to access such contents. The case is true for Kelyn (11 years old; Season 3, Episode 4) who shared that she frequently watches YouTube in her bedroom before going to sleep, which her parents do not permit. In these situations, I pose questions to children to help them view the situation from another point of view. Doing so enables a discussion of their behavior without focusing on whether or not the act was appropriate. The media literacy question “How might someone else understand this content differently?” (Center for Media Literacy, 2023) gives them an opportunity to reveal their understanding of the reason why specific media may be inappropriate for them without focusing on whether or not the behavior was inappropriate. In the abovementioned scenario with Kelyn, I asked, “Why might your parents not want you to watch YouTube before bed? What do you do if you see something on YouTube that makes it difficult to sleep?” Her response clearly reflected that she understood why nighttime viewing of YouTube was not a good idea, but the combination of the lack of enforcement from her parents and her overall love of YouTube made her sneak access.

Children also express that although they long for unlimited access to media and the ability to watch, play, or listen to whatever they please, they know that unlimited access is not the best for them. Consider the following comment from Vidit (10 years old; Season 2, Episode 3):

Sometimes I watch TV and I want to stop, but I can't. Luckily, my mom has Google WIFI which can make your internet stop, so she can stop it.

The following excerpt is another example of this inner conflict between the unlimited access that children desire versus the reality of how it makes them feel:

(on Alexa) I listen to bedtime stories and music ... Alexa's the best. I go coo-coo-crazy in my house with Alexa. She does a lot of things. We got a big Alexa. Next, we got a little Alexa. Next, we got an Alexa on our TV. (Mackenzie; 6 years old; Season 2, Episode 4)

Mackenzie recognizes that access to Alexa (a personal digital assistant) in virtually every room in her house makes her go "coo-coo-crazy" but feels powerless to resist it.

Other children analyze the power of media and recognize its ability to help them cope or feel connected. Best friends, Scout and Sami (11 years old; Season 2, Episode 5) share these stories:

I also use the media for strategies to calm down ... or to be less nervous. I usually go to Wiki-how ... Tomorrow's my karate test and I'm kind of scared for that. And I've been really nervous, so I looked up on Wiki-how, "how to make yourself less nervous."

I like watching giving away money videos. And I like fail videos. Someone walking holding a cake and falls. I don't know why it's funny to me. Or gymnastics fails. We watch them all the time together. It's more of an understanding. You watch them and know you're not the only one going through this. And actually, that's a nice thing when you can watch something and know I'm not the only one who feels this way.

Occasionally, a child shares a story then implores, "please don't tell my parents". In these rare cases, I intend to respect the child's request and delete that portion from the final version of the podcast (exceptions include admissions of selfharm or harm to others. Such a statement may be deleted from the podcast, but I would immediately inform the parents. Thankfully, this scenario has not occurred yet). The aim of the conversations is to gain insight and not negative personal repercussions. Oftentimes, a child begins a story and realizes midway that the story could get them into trouble. Typically, their desire to share the story overrides any concern,

such that they continue talking. In fact, children often share stories with defiance in their tone. They know that they are going against a family rule but are not worried, because they feel certain the parent will not do anything about it even if s/he discovers the transgression. This scenario happened in Season 2 Episode 3:

“Eminem is my favorite rapper ... usually I listen to clean (lyrics), but sometimes there isn’t clean. There’s no “clean” (setting) for YouTube music ... my parents don’t care really ... I’m not allowed to watch music videos because my mom said there might be some bad stuff on it.”. (Daniel, 10 years old)

Daniel is aware that he should not listen to music with explicit lyrics, but he has also assessed that his “parents don’t care.” His mom knows music videos may contain explicit lyrics; thus, her rule focuses on music videos. However, Daniel hears the same music through YouTube music. The mother never specifically stated that he cannot listen to rap music on YouTube, therefore, he has determined that she “doesn’t care,” although a more likely scenario is that the mother is just unaware. Daniel evaluated the situation and determined that listening to his favorite rap music on YouTube was acceptable. When I asked him, “Do you think she’d be upset if she knew you were listening to the same music with explicit lyrics on YouTube?,” he silently shrugged his shoulders and admitted, “yeah, probably.”

The goal of the podcast is to elicit open, honest conversations. In this manner, listeners can gain genuine insights into the perceptions of children about media. Notably, in the abovementioned scenario (explicit lyrics), Daniel knows the rule but opted to deviate from it, because he assumes that it is not being enforced. He even understands the value of having media rules: “there might be some bad stuff on it.” However, the lack of enforcement stops him from abiding by the rule.

Some of the most enlightening moments come from my question about family media rules. Does the child believe there are family media rules? How are they enforced? Parents often feel they have clearly communicated what type of media is allowed and not allowed, but the interviews tell a different story. Children can rarely articulate a family media rule, and if they can, they often feel that rule is not enforced and of little concern to their actual media use.

Don't watch inappropriate TV. (What's inappropriate?) Ummm... I don't know how to describe it... if there's like a lot of curse words in it... and if there was a naked person. I actually don't know (if my parents know)... well, my mom has this thing if I download an app it will go to her phone so she'll know what I'm watching, I think. (Christopher, 10 years old; Season 2, Episode 1).

I got in trouble for watching Cardi B once. She was almost naked and my mom's like "what are you watching?" and I'm like, Cardi B., and she's like "turn that off!" So, I turned it off, but then I watched it again... and she didn't know. (Genevieve, 10 years old; Season 2, Episode 1).

(I could watch movies rated) PG (parental guidance) or G (general audience). I watch mainly with my parents, so we watched a lot of PG13. I'm not supposed to watch X or R. or PG13... (the ratings stop me from seeing...) gore. Beeping out sentences. Violence. I'm not allowed to watch that, and I don't want to. (Kelyn, 9 years old; Season 3, Episode 4).

Some songs have bad words on it. But my mom lets me listen to bad words and she lets me say bad words when I'm singing... But she doesn't let me say bad words when I'm not singing... (Mackenzie, 6 years old; Season 2, Episode 4).

Typically, family rules send mixed messages to children. Instead of a rule with clarity, the rule is confusing or seemingly conveys a conflicting message. The rules are frequently situational and not absolute, which is a subtlety that children are unlikely to understand. An example of an absolute rule is, "No social media until you are 13." A situational rule is conveyed by an example from Lyla (12 years old; Season 2, Episode 8) when she shares, "I'm not allowed to show me in a bikini at the beach (on social media)." I asked, "So you can wear a bikini, but you can't post about it?" to which Lyla replied, "Right." Her parents may see a clear difference between wearing a bikini at the beach versus posting a picture of it, but this rule is confusing for Lyla. The reason is that Lyla is not considering that she is a 12-year old girl and that the people who may see her in a bikini at the beach are different than strangers that may see her photo online. She just only that it is the rule. However, children are unlikely to follow family rules on media if they only partially understand the reason underlying the rule or the consequences for failing to follow the rule.

In a world in which children have access to media with little to no adult supervision, how effective can family media rules be? As observed in

the abovementioned quotes, if a parent has clearly stated that a particular action or access is not allowed, then the child is likely aware of the rule. However, if the rule lacks corresponding consequences (i.e., if you do X, then Y will happen every time), then the child is unlikely to comply. Evidently, this issue exceeds media use. Children push against family rules in many areas. A clear communication of expectations and clear consequences for non-compliance mainly affect their behavior. Even in the interviews in which children clearly aimed to outsmart family media rules, they admit that they would likely follow the rule if they knew their parent was aware of their actions and that consequences exist.

Common Themes

A number of the children interviewed prefer reading books and lack the desire to be on social media. However, they form a small minority. The word most commonly used by the children to describe their media use is *obsessed* (“I’m obsessed with Disney Plus/Roblox/Minecraft/TikTok/YouTube”). They also commonly describe feeling addicted or overwhelmed when describing media use. They love using media. They experience fun in using media with friends but also recognize that media can occasionally exert negative effects on them. Children frequently convey the desire to spend less time online or to feel less pull to be on social media constantly but are unsure how to do so, and their parents and teachers are of little help. The following is a list of other common themes.

- Children can frequently clearly articulate the reasons why they should not be on social media, watch scary movies, or play violent video games, but they do not follow the rule. They know that the action is inappropriate for children and advise other children not to do it, but they do not use this information in making their media choices.
- The comments of the children reflect a discerning understanding of media influence; they understand that media companies track them, want to make money from them, and view their private information. However, they rarely use this knowledge to guide their media choices such as reviewing privacy settings. Their attitude is typically one of acceptance and inevitability.
- The majority of the children could not articulate any family media rules. If they could, then the rules were minimal and simplistic.

(i.e., don't share your address online.) Moreover, if plainly stated consequences did not accompany the rules, then such rules unlikely to be followed.

Conclusion

As previously noted, Kids Talk Media began before the pandemic-induced quarantine in 2020. During the quarantine, the production of the podcast was ceased, because I could not be in person with children. Now that production has resumed, a comparison of before and after is possible. For example, prior to 2020, the children frequently expressed the desire for unlimited media access, especially online. They wanted to play video games longer than permitted. They wanted to scroll through TikTok for more hours. Recently, however, children do not express the same desires. They are more likely to discuss challenges in balancing between their love of media and the recognition that it does not always make them feel good and the potential negative effects on their mental health. Children in regions of the world that shifted to schoolwork and friendships online during the pandemic experienced life online in a manner that pointed out its shortcomings. Hours of online school, playdates, and entertainment finally hit their limits. Many children lived the real-life experience of massive online access, which helped to elucidate the benefits and losses. Meeting friends online kept many children from feeling connected instead of isolated. Today, however, they are increasingly aware of the value of playing together on playgrounds, sharing a laugh with friends at the mall, or cheering for local sports team at a game. Only the years ahead will reveal how the experiences of these children will shape future media choices. Nevertheless, such experiences will surely shape them. They already have.

A minimal number of the children were aware of the skills of MIL and how such skills may help them in navigating their online lives. Many children shared stories of discussions about cyberbullying at school, assessing news, or keeping information private when online. However, they rarely referred to consistent conversations about media with parents or teachers. Conversations were not part of a broad MIL school curriculum or even a recurring topic at the family dinner table. In other words, children are looking for guidance.

The podcast continues. Future episodes will include children from different regions of the world with varying levels of access to technology and media. I cannot wait to hear their thoughts.

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