The MIT Press

Joshua Meyrowitz

The Adultlike Child and the Childlike Adult: Socialization in an Electronic Age

I N THE FIRST HALF of the twentieth century, childhood was considered a time of innocence and isolation, a time for children to be sheltered from the nasty realities of adult life. Not only were they dressed differently from adults, but there were separate "languages" for each, since certain words and topics—birth, death, sex, and money—were considered unfit for children's ears. In addition, there was a strict age-grading system, supported by the structure of the school, that designated what a child of any given age should know and do.

The last thirty years have seen a remarkable change in the image and roles of children. Childhood as a protected and sheltered period of life has all but disappeared. Children today seem less "childlike." They speak more like adults, dress more like adults, and behave more like adults than they used to. We might call this trend the "end of childhood." But that would tell only half the story, for without a clear sense of childhood, there can be no distinct notion of adulthood. Indeed, there are indications that many of the adults who have come of age within the last twenty years continue to speak, dress, and act much like overgrown children. What seems to be happening in our culture is an overall merging of childhood and adulthood. In this essay I shall briefly summarize recent changes in the social roles of children and adults and then explore the possibility that the changes are related in part to our shift from a "book culture" to a "television culture."

19

THE MERGING OF CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

One of the clearest signs of differences in status in a culture is a difference in appearance and dress. The inferior status conferred on children was once clearly discernible in the way they were dressed—whether in knickers, sailor suits, or cartoon character T-shirts. What was significant was not *what* children wore but the fact that their clothing was different from that of adults. Today, a walk on any city street or in any park suggests that the era of distinct clothing for different age-groups has passed. Children dress in three-piece suits or designer dresses, and many adults look like "big children" in their jeans, Mickey-Mouse or Superman T-shirts, and sneakers. In fact, many adults these days wear such "playclothes" to their places of work—including the White House. In addition, new "uni-age" styles of dress have emerged. Designer jeans, which are worn by young and old alike, represent a synthesis of the playclothes of children with the high-fashion clothing styles of adults. There appear to be no limits to this trend since there are now even designer jean diaper covers on the market.

This may all seem to be only a surface phenomenon—merely similar costumes overlaid on very different social beings. Yet children and adults have also begun to behave more like one another. Their posture, sitting positions, and gestures are becoming more similar, and the sight of adults sitting cross-legged on the ground in public or playing "children's games" is no longer an unusual one. Indeed, the latest generation of playthings—video and computer games—are played avidly by both adults and children alike.

Age-related vocabularies and forms of language are also merging, with many slang words, phrases, obscenities, and grammatical constructions being shared across a wide spectrum of age-groups. Children are speaking more like adults, and vice versa. Moreover, while children and adults may have always cursed in private, they now do so in front of one another. And the fact that, increasingly, children call adults—in many cases, their parents—by their first names is further linguistic evidence that the authority of adults in relation to children is disappearing.

It is no longer clear what topics should or should not be discussed with children. In any case, children now seem to know about once taboo topics before they are included in their home or school

education. Sex- and drug-education programs, for example, seem to be after the fact, since they have been outpaced by the runaway increase in teenage sexual activity and drug abuse. Birth control, abortion, alcoholism, and suicide are now "children's issues,"[1] and many young children today express fears of nuclear holocaust.[2]

For children, the issue of birth was once clouded in the myths of storks and cabbage patches. Today, many children are routinely told about birth and are included in what hospitals now call the "family birthing process." In some cases—though still rare—children are invited to be present at the delivery of their siblings.[3]

Things are changing for adults, too. Education, career choice, and developmental stages were once discussed primarily in relation to children, but increasing numbers of adults are enrolling in adult education programs, changing careers in mid-life, and becoming concerned with their "life stages."

That adult psychological temperament may also be changing is evident, for example, in the attitudes of the "me generation," which can be viewed as adult manifestations of the egocentrism traditionally associated with children. In addition, surveys indicate that the sense of responsibility that adults traditionally had for children is shrinking. Parents are less willing to make sacrifices for their children, and the numbers of parents whose thoughts about the future include concerns about their children's aspirations is in sharp decline. Americans now rank cars above children as aspects of a "good life."[4] One consequence of the loss of the traditional parental perspective is more democracy in the home. There appears to be a greater sense of equality between children and parents, and parents today are more likely to confide in their children and to admit to their own anxieties, shortcomings, and failures.[5]

This homogenization of status finds its reflection in changes in the images of adults and children in entertainment. The Shirley Temple character of the past was merely a cute and outspoken child; child stars today, however, such as Gary Coleman, often play the roles of adult characters who are imprisoned in children's bodies, as did Brooke Shields not too long ago. Similar adultlike children now appear in children's literature.[6]

In the age of the "antihero," it is also difficult to find traditional adults in films or on television. Adult characters—including many of those portrayed by Diane Keaton, Burt Reynolds, Chevy Chase, and

Elliot Gould—often have the needs and emotions of overgrown children. Not only are adults frequently outsmarted by children in today's television programs and motion pictures, but children are sometimes portrayed as more mature, sensitive, and intelligent (as in the motion picture *E.T.*).

The relative legal status of children and adults has also changed dramatically. In 1967, for example, the Supreme Court gave children the right to counsel, declaring that "neither the Fourteenth Amendment nor the Bill of Rights is for adults alone"; subsequent decisions have provided children with many adult legal rights.[7]

With the sharp increase in the number of minors who run away from home and refuse to return, courts are often faced with deciding between the rights of the children and the rights of the parents—and the balance of power is shifting toward the former. In more than twelve states, courts are now allowed to "emancipate" minors so that they can work and live apart from their parents. Connecticut, for example, allows sixteen-year-olds to "divorce" their parents and be treated legally as adults.[8] In California, freedom can be gained at age fourteen.[9]

The legal meaning of "child" has been further confused by the fact that children under the age of fifteen are increasingly committing "adult" crimes such as armed robbery, rape, and murder.[10] As a result, many states are moving away from special lenient treatment of juveniles. In 1978, for example, New York State passed a law that allows child-murderers over the age of thirteen to be tried as adults.[11] In 1979 the American Bar Association ratified a new set of standards for juvenile courts. Rather than being concerned with the child's "best interests"—the original rationale for the juvenile court system—the ABA suggested that children should be punished in proportion to the severity of their crimes.[12]

Conceptions of adult legal responsibility have also become clouded in recent years. The increasing use and discussion of the pleas of "*temporary* insanity" or "diminished capacity" as excuses for committing a crime in a moment of anger[13] suggest an attempt to legitimize temper tantrums for adults.

Even when the formal legal status of children and adults remains untouched, children have been accorded a new kind of respect from courts, medical institutions, and government agencies. Courts today are much more likely to consider a child's view in custody settle-

ments, and children and adolescents are now often asked for consent before receiving medical or psychological assistance.[14] The new attitudes are reflected in New York City's decision to name two foster children—aged thirteen and sixteen—as full-fledged members of a city panel to improve foster care.[15] Such moves represent a trend away from the traditionally paternalistic belief that adults always know what is in the best interests of a child.

In some circles, children have come to be seen as another disenfranchised "minority," and the Children's Rights Movement has developed to aid children in their struggle for freedom.[16] While some of the recent attention to children's rights focuses on the "right" not to starve or be beaten (children's *welfare*), other advocates of children's rights have pushed for the full social, economic, and political participation of children in society (children's *liberation*). As a member of the latter camp, Richard Farson has argued passionately for basic "birthrights" for children to counter what he sees as the segregation and disregard of children and the systematic discrimination against them by adults.[17] Similarly, in *Escape From Childhood,* educator John Holt outlines a "bill of rights" for children. He proposes that the "rights, privileges, duties, [and] responsibilities of adult citizens be made *available* to any young person, of whatever age, who wants to make use of them."[18] Holt's "rights" include the right to work, to travel, to vote, to have privacy, to own property, to sign contracts, to choose sexual partners, to have one's own home, and to choose one's guardians.

Such proposals for "full equality" for children and adults may be farfetched, but they reflect the current trend in child-adult relations. The "child-saving movement" of the nineteenth and and early twentieth centuries was a movement designed to meet the "special needs" of children and guarantee them the "right to childhood"—in a sense, to segregate them. The current trend is toward reintegration of the rights and roles of children and adults.[19] Certainly, all children and adults do not and cannot behave alike, but there are many more similarities in behavior and social status than there used to be. The traditional dividing lines are gone.

Whether these changes are good or bad is difficult to say. Whether children's "escape from childhood" should be viewed as liberation or aberration, or a little of both, is not clear. For better or worse,

though, childhood and adulthood, as they were once defined, no longer exist.

THE MYTH OF AGE-DETERMINISM

One of the reasons the merging of childhood and adulthood has been difficult to observe—and once observed, still difficult to accept—is that there are so few intellectual models to account for it. One might expect to find a model in developmental psychology, but the dominant research and theory in this field has focused primarily on describing the capabilities of individuals at different ages or stages of development, with the greatest attention being paid to studying the factors that contribute to, or are associated with, age- or stage-related changes. Although a variety of differences *between* age groups have been identified, and the typical characteristics of people *within* given age groups have been described, what is usually taken for granted is the preexistence of distinct life stages such as "infancy," "childhood," "adolescence," "adulthood," and "old age." For the most part, the research in developmental psychology has not been geared toward studying factors that might change the social character of different periods of life.

The findings of developmental studies are usually reported in terms of developmental stages matched to age-ranges, and while a number of psychologists have explained the limited implications of findings stated in terms of ages,[20] their explanations are rarely included in popularized summaries of developmental research. Many parents, teachers, and others assume therefore that developmental research demonstrates that age itself naturally "determines" a child's behavior and the appropriate style of interaction between children and adults. The notion of "age-determined" behavior has been reinforced and extended by popular and scholarly publications on adult "life cycles," "seasons," and "passages." These works describe such periods as the "age-thirty transition" and the "age-forty crucible."[21]

In general, the idea of clear age-related "stages" of development appears to provide scientific support for our traditional distinctions in roles, rights, and responsibilities of people of different ages. Indeed, as interpreted by some, the developmental paradigm does not even allow for the view that dramatic changes in age-related roles

are possible.[22] Yet, those who insist on the "naturalness" of our tra-
ditional conceptions of childhood and adulthood are basing their be-
lief on a very narrow cultural and historical perspective. Childhood
and adulthood have been conceived of differently in different cul-
tures, and child and adult roles have varied even within the same cul-
ture from one historical period to another.

To see and grasp the current changes in age-related roles, we need
to distinguish between the biological existence of children and the
social construction of "childhood," and to separate the matura-
tional reality of adults and the social roles of "adulthood." We can
observe physiological development, and we can test the cognitive ca-
pabilities of people of different ages in specific times and places. It is
much more difficult, however, to discover the limits of individual dif-
ferences in social development, the extent to which cultural factors
override or blur "actual" differences, or the degree to which observ-
able psychological differences among people of different ages nec-
essarily determine particular social roles. In many ways, children
may always be children and adults may always be adults, but con-
ceptions of "childhood" and "adulthood" are infinitely variable.

We have learned a great deal in our search for universal develop-
mental stages, but such investigations are incomplete. Obviously,
any description of *constants* in human development tends to over-
look the many factors that would bring about wide-scale *change* in
the definition of child and adult roles. Even a complete understand-
ing of universal features of development (and of reasons for indi-
vidual variation) would not necessarily tell us why age-related roles
vary from culture to culture and within the same culture over time.
To discover the processes through which changes in conceptions of
childhood and adulthood take place, we must look beyond the se-
quence of *individual* development and examine larger social vari-
ables that influence the behavior of *all* people, regardless of age or
developmental stage. One such variable is the "social-information
matrix."

SOCIALIZATION AS ACCESS TO INFORMATION

One of the constituent elements of social status is access to social in-
formation: people of the same social status usually have access to
similar social situations and to similar social information; people of

different social statuses usually have access to different social situations and to different social information.[23] Distinctions in status, therefore, are often supported by separating people into different social and informational worlds: managers keep customers out of restaurant kitchens; the officers' club is off limits to enlisted personnel in the armed services; and in schools, students are usually excluded from faculty meetings. Without the maintenance of such distinctions, differences in status would also begin to blur.

The movement from one social status to another—whether child to adult, medical student to doctor, or any role to any other role—generally involves gaining admittance to the locations associated with the new status and learning the "secrets" of those who play that role.

Human development and age-related social roles, therefore, are not only based on physiological and cognitive growth, but also on what might be called specific "patterns of access to social information." Every stage of socialization involves both exposure to, and restriction from, social information. For example, we tell sixth-graders things we keep hidden from fifth-graders and keep hidden from sixth-graders things we will tell them when they become seventh-graders. Socialization, therefore, can be thought of as a process of gradual, or staggered, exposure to social information. Children are slowly walked up the staircase of adult information, one step at a time. A child's individual cognitive development may help in the climb, but it is not the only factor. The amount of information available at each step will also greatly influence the child's relative social status.

This analysis suggests that if a society is able to divide what people of different ages know into many small steps, it will be able to establish many stages or levels of childhood. Conversely, if a society does not have sharp divisions in what people of different ages know, there will be fewer stages of childhood. If we always taught fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-graders in the same classroom, for example, we would have a very difficult time clearly dividing them into three different social statuses. The variations in social roles for people of different ages that characterize different historical periods, different cultures, and different subcultures may therefore be based in part on different patterns of "who knows what about whom."

By conceiving of socialization as a process related to "patterns of access to information," we are able to approach the study of media effects from a new perspective. While many studies have examined the effects of media *messages* on people at specific stages of socialization, very few studies have examined how changes in media environments may affect the structure of the socialization process itself. One way to do this is to look beyond specific messages and examine how different media may create different "situational geographies" for the worlds of childhood and adulthood.

By focusing below on the potential effects of a shift from "book situations" to "television situations," I do not mean to obliterate other explanations for recent changes in socialization or to dismiss the many factors that work to maintain traditional distinctions between childhood and adulthood. Certainly, the growing instability of marriages, economic issues, and many other variables contributes to recent changes; conversely, family traditions, religious beliefs, schooling, social class, and place of residence mute and channel many of the pressures toward merging age-related roles. I merely hope to show that changes in media may have much more to do with overall trends in conceptions of childhood and adulthood than is generally assumed.

Put differently, the subject of the remainder of this essay is not change in socialization and many of its possible causes; the subject is change in media and many of the ways such change may influence age-related roles. The analysis here should be interpreted the same way findings in an experiment on the effects of a chemical known to have been added recently to drinking water nationwide might be interpreted. This chemical may be found to increase heart rate and metabolism, for example, but such a fact does not mean that there are no other variables that may have similar effects, and it does not mean that there are no other drugs, foods, or family habits that might moderate or offset the effects of the chemical. The qualifier that must be used to defend the cause-effect linking in all experimental findings is "all other things held constant." The scholar using an analytical method must often use a similar disclaimer when studying the potential effects of a single variable. In what follows, I try to indicate the *direction* of television's effects on age-related roles—all other things held constant.

AT HOME IN TELEVISION LAND

At one time, what the young, preschool child knew about the world was determined primarily by where he or she lived and was allowed to go. The child's experience was often limited to the home and the surrounding area. As the child learned to read and gained proficiency in it, and as the area in which he or she was free to travel about expanded, the child gained access to the larger society—reading offering informational access, and travel physical access, to the world.

The family home has traditionally been portrayed as a protective and nurturing environment. In modern urban societies, however, the family home has functioned as a very *restrictive* environment as well, and in this way has limited the experiences of children. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an early feminist writer, attacked the home as a prison, one that restricted both children and women from the outside world.[24] Even those who support the traditional function of the home recognize implicitly its limiting aspect. In *The Sociology of Childhood,* Oscar Ritchie and Marvin Koller note that the home is the child's "small world" and that the "family serves as a screen to the culture of its society and selects only those portions that it deems worthy of attention."[25] The child of course is not completely isolated from information about the outside world, but this information is generally filtered through parents and other adults who are allowed to leave the home freely. Because of the sharp limitations on the child's experience of social reality, Ritchie and Koller observe, visitors from the outside world often become a center of interest and fascination. "As a person who lives outside the child's home, the guest functions as a transmitter, bringing into the world of the child new ideas and information, and new and different opportunities for vicarious participation in the outside world."[26]

The "transmitter" metaphor is an interesting and significant one, revealing, as it does, a weakness in Ritchie and Koller's own description of the role of the family and home in socialization. They were writing in 1964, and should have realized that in over 90 percent of American households at that time, the home environment they describe was no longer restrictive, having already been transformed by a new and powerful transmitter—television. They note that "largely because parents control the situation, the child-guest relationship is

likely to be a positive aspect of socialization."[27] Yet, the traditional family guest is invited, remains under family control, and acts as an adult filter on child information, while the guests who come through the television set are often uninvited visitors who broaden the child's informational world without the parents' full approval or control.

The impact of television on the redefinition of "home" is all but lost in the dominant message-oriented approach to the study of television. The focus on content rather than on situational structure has obscured the ways in which television bypasses the filters of adult authority and decreases the significance of the child's physical isolation in the home.

In one sense, it makes little difference whether children's programs reinforce the message that "adults always know best" or the message that "adults don't always know best," or whether a commercial tells children to buy a product themselves or to ask their parents to do it for them, since, regardless of the specific messages in programs and advertising, the pattern of information flow into the home has changed. While young children once received virtually all of their information about the outside world from their parents, television now speaks directly to them, with the result that power relationships within the family are partially rearranged. Television's messages have a significant impact—again, regardless of specific content—because they take children beyond the informational limitations once set by walls and parents.

Certainly, today's parents still control much of the atmosphere of the family home. Yet, while homelife was once the base of all the child's experiences, children who have television sets now have outside perspectives from which to judge and evaluate family rituals, beliefs, and religious practices. While parents could once easily mold their young children's upbringing by speaking and reading to children only about the things they wished their children to be exposed to, today's parents must battle with thousands of competing images and ideas over which they have little direct control. The influence of parents and family life continues to be seen, of course: children still differ markedly by class, religion, and ethnic background. But the family is no longer an all-powerful formative influence.

Very young children were once limited to the few sources of information available to them within or around the home: paintings, illustrations, views from a window, and what adults said and read

to them. Now television escorts them across the globe even before they have permission to cross the street. One of the reasons many children may no longer seem to "know their place" is that they no longer *have* a place, in the sense of an isolated environment that largely restricts their access to adult situations and secrets.

"CHILDREN'S TELEVISON"—THERE'S NO SUCH THING

Access to television and access to books are two quite different things. Reading and writing involve an abstract code of arbitrary and semantically meaningless symbols. To read and write efficiently, these symbols must be memorized, practiced, and internalized. The complexity of print's code excludes very young children from virtually all communications in print. In a sense, print creates "places" where adults can communicate with one another without being overheard by children. Through books, adults can privately discuss things they may wish to keep hidden from young children. Furthermore, because reading involves a complex skill that is learned in stages, adults can control the information given to children of different ages by varying the complexity of the code in which books on various subjects are written. Because children must read simple children's books before reading complex adult books, print allows for the separation of people of different ages into different informational worlds.[28]

The varying complexity of the code in print not only serves to isolate children from adult situations, but works as well to isolate adults from children's situations. Children, for example, can be shielded from "adult" topics such as sex, crime, and death simply by encoding this information in long, difficult words and complexly written sentences. At the same time, however, the content of most children's books is so simple that adults find them uninteresting and would be embarrassed to be seen reading them. (Indeed, finding appropriate material to use in teaching illiterate adults to read is a major problem.) Children usually do not know what adults are reading, and adults (unless they are schoolteachers or parents who read books aloud to children) usually do not know what children are reading. With print, a society tends to be divided into many different information systems based on differences in the mastery of reading skills.

"Children's books" are special, then, for two significant reasons: they are the only type of books many children can read, and generally, only children read them. In this sense, children's literature is a kind of informational ghetto, both isolated and isolating.

There is no situational equivalent to a children's book on television. Television has no complex access code to exclude young viewers or to divide its audience into different age groups. Adult programs may present children with information they do not fully understand, and children's programs may contain childish content, but the basic code in which all programs are presented is similar for every television show: pictures and sounds. Unlike print, television's symbolic form resembles the things it represents. Television pictures—like all pictures—look like real objects and people; televison speaks in a human voice. While children under the age of eleven or twelve may not fully understand television in an adult sense, they still find television accessible and absorbing. Children from two to five spend very little time staring at words and sentences in a book, but over the last few years, they have spent an average of between twenty-five and thirty-two hours a week watching television.[29]

In contrast to books, television programs have few, if any, "prerequisites." There is no set order in which programs must be viewed, because most programs require the same degree (or lack) of skill. One does not have to watch "Romper Room" before watching "Sesame Street"; one does not have to watch "The Muppets" before watching "Dallas." With television, there is no media filter to shield children from exposure to adult programs, and there is no simplistic visual style to bore adults when they watch children's programs. It is no surprise, then, that people of all ages tend to watch many of the same programs. In recent years, "Dallas," "The Love Boat," and "The Muppets" have been among the most popular programs in *all* age-groups in the country.[30] While the world of children's books can be insulated so that children are shown only an idealized view of life, television news and entertainment present to young children images of adults who lie, drink, cheat, and murder.

What is revolutionary about television, then, is not that it gives children adult minds, but that it allows the very young child to be "present" at adult interactions. Television removes barriers that once divided people of different ages and reading abilities into different social situations.

The widespread use of television, therefore, is equivalent to a broad social decision to allow young children to be present at wars and funerals, courtships and seductions, criminal plots and cocktail parties. Young children may not fully understand the issues of sex, death, crime, and money that are presented to them on television. Or, put differently, they may understand these issues only in child-like ways. Yet television exposes children to many topics and behaviors that adults have spent several centuries trying to keep hidden from them. Television thrusts children into a complex adult world, and it provides the impetus for them to ask the meanings of actions and words they would not yet have heard of, or read about, without television.

Not only are most children able to watch adult programming, but from the very beginning of the television era, they have *preferred* it.[31] According to one recent study, even the best available children's program cannot compete with adult programs for the child's interest.[32] Nevertheless, many parents naively continue to demand more "children's programming" on television or look forward to the more age-specific programming of cable, direct satellite-to-home broadcasts, and videodiscs. But a separate information system equivalent to the isolated world of children's books will not come into being simply by creating television programs that contain content traditionally thought suitable for children. Nor can it. There is, in fact, no children's television as distinct from adult television. There is simply "television."

THE TELEVISION DOORWAY

Many of the physical characteristics of books serve as filters for the information made accessible to children. Each book is a distinct object that a child must acquire individually. If the book is not given to the child by a parent, the child must leave the house and borrow or buy it—usually from an adult. The special library cards given to children prevent them from borrowing adult books, and these books are often placed on shelves beyond a child's reach. Moreover, children have little knowledge of what books are available or where to get them.

As individual objects, books can be selectively chosen and selectively given to children. But television content is much more difficult

to control. Once the child has access to a television set, he or she has direct access to everything that comes through it. The child does not have to go anywhere special to find a television program or necessarily ask any adult to see it. While the reading code and physical characteristics of books provide "automatic" constraints that require minimal parental intervention, effective censorship of children's television viewing would involve active and constant monitoring. With television, therefore, the important decision is whether to have a television set or not, whether to expose children to almost *all* of television's offerings or *none* of them.

Furthermore, because the child has not brought the specific program into the house, there is little guilt by association with a television program. For a child to buy a cheap novel or a "dirty book" and bring it into the house is to associate with its content; to watch such a television show is merely to view innocently what has been piped into the home (and what must be, from the child's perspective, implicitly sanctioned by the parents, who provide the television set, and by the larger society, which presents itself through this medium).

A child's book is like a guest in the house. It makes a "social entrance"; that is, it comes through the door and remains under at least nominal parental authority. As a physical object, it must be stored somewhere in the house—whether on a coffee table or under a mattress—and it can be discarded. The child's television set, in contrast, is like a new doorway to the home. Through it come many welcome and unwelcome visitors: schoolteachers, presidents, salesmen, police officers, prostitutes, murderers, friends, and strangers.

Parents who tackle the monumental task of censoring their children's television viewing are faced with at least two significant dilemmas. First, controlling viewing involves a conflict of values: protecting children versus allowing them to learn as much as they can. Parents once had to encourage children to read and learn. A good deal of the protection from adult information in books was taken care of automatically by the inherent features of print. Now parents find themselves in the uncomfortable position of actively intervening in the learning process of their youngsters. Parents must now try to evaluate the content of television and decide—often on the spot—whether their children can handle it.

Second, for parents to control their children's viewing of television very often means limiting their own. While a child has virtually no access to the books being read by adults in the same room, a television program being watched by adults in the room the child is in is accessible to the child. Many children are exposed to adult news, for example, because their parents watch the news during dinner.[33] To control children's viewing, therefore, parents must either limit their own or physically divide the family. The situation of course is further complicated when there are several children of different ages in the household.

The unique characteristics of books make it possible for adults to enforce the implicit rule, "Read what we want you to read about, not what we read about," but television offers little support for a like admonition. Reading, a family can stay together in a single room and yet be divided into different informational worlds. In households that have more than one television set, children and adults can be in different rooms and still be united into a single informational arena.

EXPOSING THE "SECRET OF SECRECY"

There are many books for parents that discuss what books are suitable for children. This is essentially an adult-to-adult interaction that is closed to young children, and in fact, most children are even unaware that such books exist. With the help of such private adult "discussions," children were once shielded from certain topics such as sex, money, death, crime, and drugs, and shielded, furthermore, from the very fact that they were being protected. Print allowed for an "adult conspiracy."

This does not hold for television. It is true that television frequently offers advice to parents. Talk shows discuss children's television, and warnings are placed at the beginning of programs to let parents know that a program may contain material "unsuitable" for preteenagers. Yet, while the content is similar to that of books which give advice to parents about children's literature, the structure of the communication situation is radically different: television discussions and warnings are accessible to children. Ironically, then, such advice on television often cues children to programs they are not supposed to see and increases their interest in what follows. Even if such warn-

ings are also heard by parents, and even if parents act to censor a program, parental control is nevertheless weakened because the control becomes overt, and therefore often unpalatable to both children and adults. Visible censorship is the weakest form of control.

Once television provides children with the certain knowledge that adult secrets concerning children exist, complete and immediate comprehension of adult behavior is of secondary importance. The knowledge that a secret exists is half the secret. Once its existence is revealed, claims that "I'm not supposed to tell you" or "It's a secret" generally lead to the demand for revelation. It is not necessary for television to reveal *all* of the secrets of adults; children already know a great deal about traditional adult roles just by knowing for certain that adults consciously conspire to hide certain things from them. Television, then, may have its greatest effect on children's knowledge and behavior when adults use television forums (such as talk shows) to discuss how to control television's effects on children.

Contrary to many claims, therefore, children's access to adult information through television is not simply the result of a lapse in parental authority and responsibility. Print provides many filters and controls that television by its very nature cannot. No matter what parents do, short of removing the television set altogether, the old information environment cannot be fully reinstated. And even if the set is removed from one child's home, there are certainly sets in the homes of friends and relatives.

Parents may be somewhat helpless in the face of television, but surely, regulation of what broadcasters are allowed to show on television will have a tremendous impact on what children know and learn. If, for example, only conservative programs such as "Little House on the Prairie" or "Leave It to Beaver" are permitted, and shows such as "One Day at a Time," "Different Strokes," and "Silver Spoons" are banned, won't children be provided only with the information traditionally given to them in books? Not necessarily.

Certainly, different programs have different effects. But the difference in impact is not as great or as simple as is generally assumed. While traditional shows such as "Leave It to Beaver" are, in manifest content, more conservative than newer programs such as "One Day at a Time," the two are, in one sense, very similar in terms of what they reveal to children about adult life.

Traditional distinctions between child and adult behavior depend not only on the restriction of what children know about adult topics such as sex, murder, death, and money, but also upon the restriction of what children know about adult *role-playing*. To borrow from the theater, traditional children's books presented children with an "onstage" view of adulthood, wherein parents were all-knowing, calm, cool, and collected; children were never exposed to the "backstage" view of adulthood, wherein adults displayed doubts, anxieties, fears, childish behaviors, arguments, sexual activity, illness, *and* preparation for, and relaxation of, their parental roles.[34] Children, in fact, were shielded from the *knowledge* that such a backstage area even existed. They were presented with the onstage role as the reality. The secrecy surrounding the adult backstage not only kept children innocent, but also allowed adults to "stage" a very formal image of adulthood, since the larger an actor's rehearsal and relaxation area, the more formal and confident the performance.

Yet even traditional, conservative television programs tend to reveal a backstage (or perhaps a "sidestage") view of adulthood. Child viewers see adults moving from backstage to onstage, behaving one way when they are with their peers and another when they are with children. The parents are shown as cool and rational with their children, but when they are by themselves, they display doubts and anxieties, and agonize over "what to do with the kids."

While the child *portrayed* on traditional television shows may be innocent and sheltered, the child *watching* the programs sees both the hidden behavior and the process of concealing it from children. "Father Knows Best," for example, exposed child viewers to the ways in which a father and mother manipulate their behavior to make it appear to their children that they "know best." This view is very damaging to the traditional adult role.

The behavior in the revealed adult backstage may be idealized and fictionalized, but from a social dynamics perspective, what is significant is the revelation of the existence of the backstage itself. If nothing else, children are shown through traditional television programs that adults "play roles" for children. This is a dramatic discovery. Children old enough to understand basic deception learn that the behavior adults exhibit before them is not necessarily their "real" or only behavior. (It is no surprise that the generation which grew up watching "Father Knows Best" and other traditional programs be-

came so concerned with the issue of "credibility" and the gap be-
tween private and public behaviors.)

As a result of such views of adulthood, children may become sus-
picious of adults and more unwilling to accept all that adults do or
say at face value. Conversely, adults may feel "exposed" by tele-
vision, and in the long run, it may no longer seem to make as much
sense to try to keep certain things hidden from children. Indeed, tra-
ditional "adulthood" was not something that simply developed as
people grew older; it was also a behavioral style that was supported
by being able to hide many childlike behaviors in a private back-
stage area. As television blurs the dividing line between the back-
stage and onstage areas of adulthood in our culture, many childlike
behaviors emerge into the new public adult role. Television's expo-
sure of the "staging of adulthood"—with its secret-keeping and se-
cret of secrecy—therefore undermines both traditional childhood
naiveté *and* the all-knowing confident adult role, and fosters the
movement toward a uni-age behavioral style.[35]

LITERACY AND THE "INVENTION" OF
CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

If television can alter the social meaning of childhood and adult-
hood, then it stands to reason that these life stages, as they have been
defined for many generations in our culture, are not natural or nec-
essary states of being. Indeed, the above arguments rest heavily on
the plausibility of the notion that our old views of childhood and
adulthood were dependent, at least in part, upon print and could not
have existed in quite the same way in a primarily oral society.

The history of childhood is a relatively new field, yet there is
already striking, if preliminary, support for the idea that our tradi-
tional concept of childhood was related in great measure to print-
ing. While the various studies of childhood point to many fluctua-
tions in attitudes toward children across time, country, class, and
religion, one relatively consistent theme that emerges is that of a ma-
jor shift in attitudes toward children beginning among some classes
in the sixteenth century, the same century that saw the spread of lit-
eracy and printing in the vernacular throughout Western Europe. Be-
fore that time, little special attention was paid to children. From the
sixteenth to the twentieth century, however, children were increas-

ingly isolated from adult society and perceived as a separate group requiring special care, protection, and restriction.

In the best-known work on the subject, *Centuries of Child-hood*,[36] Philippe Ariès advances the rather startling argument that childhood was "invented" in the sixteenth century. According to Ariès, prior to that time, the notion of childhood as a separate time of life simply did not exist. More precisely, age did not define social status or role. Once past infancy, children began to participate in adult activities and learned about life through direct experience.

Children often worked beside adults, drank in taverns with adults, went to war with them, and shared their beds. Adults and children played the same games. Neither had a distinct style of dress, and there were no topics, words, or activities from which children were to be shielded. The few formal schools that existed (primarily to train clerics) were not divided into separate classes, and it was not unusual for a ten-year-old to sit next to a twenty-year-old in class. Young students lived where they could find lodging, bore arms, drank, and gambled.

Ariès study is mostly of France, but his observations find their echo in other European countries. Lawrence Stone, for example, notes that before the sixteenth century, English children were often neglected or ignored by their parents, who sent them away from home when they were seven or eight, usually to work in the home of another family. The child's world was essentially that of the adult. Children saw deaths and executions, witnessed sexual activities, and often engaged in sex play themselves.[37] Thus, while children have always existed in the physiological sense, the preprint oral society of Western Europe accorded them few special social roles or behaviors.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, however, a new concept of children began to take hold; from relatively independent persons, they became weak, innocent beings in need of special care, love, discipline, and protection from evil. No longer were they to be exposed to violent and vulgar folktales as before, since they were now considered to be too innocent to share fully in "adult" information. Clerics began to demand that children should read only expurgated versions of the classics. Special etiquette books for children were printed, along with separate guides for their parents. The idea of supervising children at all times and restricting their wanderings and

activities began to grow. Moralists began to speak against the mix-
ing of ages in schools, and the school slowly evolved into a strictly
age-graded structure. Precocity, which was once as valued as it was
common, began to be seen as a dangerous disease. Children's ages
more and more determined what they should know, where they
could go, and what they could do.

Stone notes that the "innocence" of children, first discussed by hu-
manists in the Renaissance, was quickly "interpreted as liability to
sin,"[38] and Ariès suggests that childish innocence led to "safeguard-
ing it against pollution by life."[39] But while children began to be pro-
tected from aspects of adult life, they were not at first isolated from
death. For years, fear of death and eternal damnation were used to
scare children into piety. Children were taken to see hangings and
corpses, and encouraged to "convert" to Christianity before it was
too late.

Later, the new attention paid to children would evolve into the
more modern "maternal, child-oriented, affectionate and permissive
mode."[40] The change occurred at different times in different coun-
tries, classes, and religions. But by the nineteenth century, the belief
in "infant depravity" and the need for young children to undergo
"conversions" to Christ were generally abandoned in favor of views
of children as, at worst, morally neutral, and at best, angelic redeem-
ers of adult sinfulness.[41]

Despite the varied treatment of children from the sixteenth
through the early twentieth centuries, the entire period was set apart
from both earlier periods and from present trends by an underlying
consistency: children were seen as a distinct category of people to be
isolated from the adult world and segregated in their own institu-
tions and subculture. Why was this so? Why did this notion of chil-
dren develop in the sixteenth century, and how can we account for
its decline today?

There are, no doubt, multiple reasons for so fundamental a shift
in the social conception of children, but the analysis presented here
supports the view that the spread of printing and literacy may have
been prime factors in the development of the "innocent" child. To
share fully in the literate adult world, a child had to learn to read.

Many other features of the spread of childhood, as described by
Ariès and other historians, support this analysis. Childhood as a
separate period of life developed first among the middle and upper

classes, as did literacy. Boys were thought of as children long before girls—perhaps because boys were sent off to school to learn to read and write, while their sisters stayed home and immediately took on the dress and tasks of adult women.

In the lower classes, which were for the most part illiterate, the new concepts of childhood took hold only much later. In the nineteenth century, many uneducated children worked in factories beside their parents. John Sommerville notes the irony that the nineteenth century saw both the heights and depths of childhood. As the children of the educated were being glorified with their own subculture of books and toys, the children of the poor and illiterate were providing the labor to support this subculture. Publishers, for example, hired children of the lower class to hand-tint engravings in the growing numbers of books for middle-class children.[42]

The increasing influence of books throughout the period led to changes in their form that reinforced the new belief in the distinctness of children. In the eighteenth century, children's books began to shift away from pedantic moral instruction and joyless drill to books of entertainment and unworldly play. A whole subculture for children developed: books and fairy tales, toys, birthday celebrations, and nursery rhymes. As education became more nearly universal in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, childhood was extended to the lower classes. Children were sent to school at an earlier age and remained longer. Age-grading of both children and lessons became stricter and stricter.[43]

There are many implicit suggestions in the historical literature of the possible role of literacy in the increasing segregation of children and adults; it is therefore odd that most historians have nothing explicit to say about it. Stone notes that new approaches to children developed first among the most literate groups, but he attributes this to the openness of literate peoples to "innovations." Furthermore, while he suggests that the greater spread of literacy among men may have led to a decrease in the relative status of women, he fails to extend this argument to its obvious implications for the changing status of children and adults. Nevertheless, Stone does observe—without analysis—how a new concern over children's proper education led parents to "interfere" with children's freedoms in new ways.[44] And the general data presented by Stone and other historians suggest that the growth and spread of schooling was paralleled by a

growing belief that certain things should be kept hidden from children.

Sommerville also provides some inadvertent clues to the role of literacy in the advent of childhood. He notes that before the spread of literacy, people of all ages enjoyed listening to what we today call nursery tales. "What has changed since then is that adults have 'grown up' and have left these stories to children. Partly, this has been the result of literacy, which develops man's critical abilities but shrivels his imagination. . . . It may be that adults were more child-like in the early years of the modern era."[45]

Elsewhere Sommerville notes that changes in community traditions occurred when "adults became too grownup and inhibited to take part in the songs, games, and dancing that had once bound the various age groups together."[46] Yet, while Sommerville briefly suggests that literacy is responsible for making adults less childlike, he neglects to consider the other side of the coin: that literacy may have made children seem less adultlike.

To my knowledge, the only historian who has explicitly linked literacy with the invention of childhood is Elisabeth Eisenstein. In her extensive analysis of the impact of printing on Western culture, she briefly suggests several ways in which printing fostered the age-grading of students and the separation of children and adults. The mechanical aspects of printing and the resulting potential for technical precision, she suggests, caused a general fascination with system, method, and *sequence*. Moreover, the growth of the printing industry allowed for segregation of markets and audiences. Some books began to be aimed only at teachers or parents, while "textbooks were newly designed to take students in sequence from the most elementary to the most advanced level of a given skill." Eisenstein suggests that new views of childhood may have been related to the significant transition from "learning by doing" to "learning by reading." "As a consumer of printed materials geared to a sequence of learning stages, the growing child was subjected to a different developmental process than was the medieval apprentice, ploughboy, novice or page."[47]

Printing and spreading literacy, says Eisenstein, also created a new way of "adult thinking" based on "cumulative cognitive advance and incremental change," that, in effect, created childhood by default. "Indeed the more adult activities were governed by conscious

deliberation or going by the book, the more striking the contrast offered by the spontaneous and impulsive behavior of young offspring, and the more strenuous the effort required to remold young 'bodies and souls.' "[48]

These many clues to the link between literacy and the development of "childhood" and "adulthood" further support the argument that television may be a prime factor in the current evolution toward more homogenized adult/child roles.

<div align="center">*   *   *</div>

The argument that different media of communication foster different conceptions of "childhood" and "adulthood" may at first seem facile and mystical. Yet it is logical to argue that similarity of social status is dependent upon ability to participate relatively equally in social interaction and that such participation depends on communication skills. In the primarily oral society of the Middle Ages, children may have been seen as less distinct from adults because by the age of seven or eight, children generally master the basics of speech. Printing and literacy may have given a boost to the Renaissance, but they also created a new and lasting dark age for the young and illiterate.

The medium of print removed the child from the adult world in a manner and to a degree inconceivable in an oral culture.[49] To learn what adults knew, to be able to join adult interactions in print, now required many years of schooling and training. Printing allowed for all-adult interactions in which parents and teachers could "privately" discuss how to treat children, what to teach them, and what to keep from them. It is no surprise, then, that the image of the weak and naive child should have developed alongside the growing impact of printing. Children were suddenly considered very "innocent," not immediately in the moral sense (which developed later), but in the sense of innocence of experience and knowledge. Conversely, adults gained in image and prestige as they were increasingly able to conceal their doubts, anxieties, and childish behaviors from children.

Of course, if television does undermine the traditional "staging of adulthood" that was fostered by print, then the undermining pro-

cess must have begun with earlier media such as film and radio. Yet neither film nor radio has all of the characteristics that make television a potent merger of child and adult situations. While movies, like television, have an accessible audio/visual code, the child has to leave the home and travel through the adult world to pay for and see a movie. This precludes viewing by very young children, who spend many hours a week in front of the television set. Even for the older child, the choice to see a *particular* movie is quite distinct from the random flip-of-the-dial television-viewing that provides children with information they have not directly sought. Similarly, while radio is, like television, a new doorway to the home, its code is wholly aural and verbal; a listener needs to fill in the pictures based on *past experience*. This requirement obviously puts the inexperienced child at a disadvantage. Furthermore, radio's reliance on language often takes it to the realm of high-level abstractions that cannot easily be *pictured*. Television, on the other hand, tends to turn to the more tangible (and less impressive and mystifying) aspects of everyday social behavior.

With television today, the form in which information is transmitted in our society once again conspires against controlling what children know about adulthood and adult roles. Children still pass through a sequence of cognitive and physiological phases, but the social stages of information access have been blurred. In television, there is no set sequence in the level or type of information accessible. It bypasses the hierarchy of information access supported by stages of reading literacy and the age-specific grades of the school system. Indeed, the whole fascination with linear "sequences" and "stages" that printing encouraged seems to be disappearing from our culture.

While critics have attacked television for weakening children's willingness and ability to learn to read, television may undermine the *structure* of the traditional school system more than it undermines its particular lessons. The age-graded structure of the school not only gives children in each age-group certain information, but also consciously holds back information. Such a system cannot easily accommodate children who, through television or other sources, have gained access to social information in no particular pattern or sequence. While the school continues to have many valuable lessons to teach children, it can no longer assume that children who cannot

read know little about adult behavior, and it cannot assume that even children in the early grades will be willing to accept the ideal- ized and mythologized versions of reality that were designed for "in- nocent children."

As I said earlier, the effects of television are muted and shaped by many factors—religion, class, race, region, and education. In addi- tion, the continuing importance of literacy in our culture places a limit on how homogenized childhood and adulthood can become. Yet the old sharp distinctions in the roles of people of different ages can no longer be maintained. Television has had a tendency to blur traditional distinctions in age-related roles by making it much more difficult for adults to maintain different informational and behav- ioral worlds for people of different ages. Just as we cannot clearly distinguish between the social statuses of students of different ages if we teach them all in the same classroom, neither can we make very sharp distinctions in status if we expose everyone to similar infor- mation through television.

Clear differences in social status often rely on lack of intimate knowledge of "the other." If the mystery and distance disappear, so do many formal behaviors. In the shared environment of television, children and adults know a great deal about one another's behavior and social knowledge—too much, in fact, for them to play out the traditional complementary roles of innocence versus omniscience.

ENDNOTES

[1]For statistics on the rapid increase in teenage sexual activity, drug abuse, alcohol- ism, abortion, and suicide, see Teenage Pregnancy: The Problem that Hasn't Gone Away, by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (New York: Alan Guttmacher In- stitute, 1981); Lloyd D. Johnston, Jerald G. Bachman, and Patrick M. O'Malley, Student Drug Use in America, 1975-1981 (Rockville, Md: Department of Health and Human Services, 1981); and "Adults Are Failing, Not the Children," USA Today, February 1984.

[2]William Beardslee and John Mack, "The Impact on Children and Adolescents of Nuclear Developments," in *Psychosocial Aspects of Nuclear Developments,* American Psychiatric Association Task Force Report no. 20 (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1982), pp. 64–93.

[3]For indications of the new attitude toward children and childbirth, see, for example, Tracy Hotchner, *Pregnancy and Childbirth: A Complete Guide to a New Life* (New York: Avon, 1979).

[4]William Watts, "The Future Can Fend for Itself," *Psychology Today,* September 1981, pp. 36-48.

[5]See, for example, the interview with Kenneth Keniston, director of the Carnegie Council study on children, "More Rights for Children: What an Expert Says," *U.S. News & World Report,* October 31, 1977, p. 33.

[6]See, for example, Judy Blume, *Superfudge* (New York: Dutton, 1980).

[7]Serena Stier, "Children's Rights and Society's Duties," *Journal of Social Issues 34* (2) (1978): 48.

[8]Lynn Langway et al., "A Nation of Runaway Kids," *Newsweek,* October 18, 1982, pp. 97-98.

[9]Mark Blackburn, "Teen-Agers Leave Home—Legally," *The New York Times,* February 20, 1980.

[10]Comparison of the FBI's 1951 and 1981 *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States and Its Possessions* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice) indicates a phenomenal increase over the last three decades in the proportion of arrests for murder (up 500 percent), robbery (up 1,750 percent), and rape (up 4,000 percent) that involve children under the age of fifteen—even as the corresponding Census Bureau reports, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), indicate that the proportion of the population in that age-range has decreased. At least part of this apparent change in criminal activity may be attributable to a change in the *reporting* of crimes committed by children, but even such a trend would suggest a significant shift in conceptions of "childhood."

[11]Linda Greenhouse, "Pragmatism Brings Changes in the Juvenile Justice System," *The New York Times,* February 18, 1979.

[12]Ibid.

[13]For a discussion of the current controversy over criminal responsibility and "irresistible impulse," see Willard Gaylin, *The Killing of Bonnie Garland: A Question of Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), pp. 245-71, and the chapter, "Criminal Intent and Responsibility," In John Monahan and Laurens Walker, *Social Science in Law: Cases, Materials and Problems* (Mineola, N.Y.: Foundation Press, forthcoming).

[14]Stier, "Children's Rights and Society's Duties," p. 49.

[15]Peter Kihss, "2 Children in Foster Care Named to City Panel to Improve System," *The New York Times,* June 11, 1979.

[16]See, for example, Elise Boulding, "Children's Rights," *Society,* November/December 1977, pp. 39-43, and Marian Wright Edelman, "In Defense of Children's Rights," *Current,* April 1978, pp. 16-20.

[17]Richard Farson, *Birthrights* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

[18]John Holt, *Escape from Childhood* (New York: Dutton, 1974), p. 18.

[19]Ruby Takanishi, "Childhood as a Social Issue: Historical Roots of Contemporary Child Advocacy Movements," *Journal of Social Issues 34* (2) (1978): 8-28.

[20]In *Childhood: Pathways of Discovery* (London: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 53, for example, psychologists Sheldon and Barbara White note that age is "a profoundly unbiological fact about a child" that merely represents the number of times the earth has circled the sun since the child was born. Describing development in terms of age-ranges, then, is only an easy way of summarizing or averaging developmental changes; children of the same age often have very different abilities. The Whites suggest that Piaget's age-related cognitive stages are the weakest part of his theory. "All the evidence shows that there are no sudden and total transformations in a child's thinking at any age." Other psychologists have pointed out the problems in *any* studies that describe behavior as a function of age. See, for example, Joachim F. Wohlwill, "The Age Variable in Psychological Research," *Psychological Review* 77 (1970): 49-64. As Wohlwill and others note, age is unlike other presumed behavioral "causes" in that a person's age is not something that can be manipulated by a researcher, and therefore the effects of age cannot actually be tested experimentally. Further, for many practical reasons, most developmental studies cannot even follow the lives of subjects over many years. Instead, within a short time period, people who are age X (four years old, for example), are compared to those who are age Y (nine years old). There is no direct evidence in such studies that in five years the four-year-olds will respond the way the nine-year-olds do now, or that the latter were similar to today's four-year-olds five years ago. The developmental *process* must be inferred, and serious mistakes are possible. As Ralph L. Rownow notes in *Paradigms in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), people were taught for many years that intelligence declined with age. But this belief was based on the results of intelligence tests given to people of different ages *at the same time*. The differences in scores were assumed to be related to age when they were probably due to economic and social change (pp. 90-91).

[21]See, for example, Daniel J. Levinson et al., *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Knopf, 1978) and Gail Sheehy *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Dutton, 1976).

[22]When I began speaking and writing about the merging of childhood and adulthood as part of my doctoral research in the mid-1970s, my observations and analyses were often greeted with hostility and ridicule. I was frequently lectured on the "naturalness" of childhood as "proven" in developmental research. In the last few years, the changes in childhood have become more numerous and explicit, and a number of others have written about them. David Elkind has described *The Hurried Child* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1981), Marie Winn has written of *Children Without Childhood* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), and Neil Postman—one of the faculty sponsors of my doctoral dissertation—has described the *Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte, 1982). But even these writers tend to view the current changes as negative distortions of "proper" child-adult roles.

[23]For a discussion of the relationship between variable patterns of information flow and the variable structure of roles of group identity, socialization, and hierarchy, see chapter 4 of Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

[24]*The Home*, reprint of 1903 edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 75.

[25](New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), pp. 86, 109.

[26]Ibid., p. 103.

[27]Ibid., p. 105.

[28]There is of course, nothing inherent in print which *demands* that adults use books to shield children from certain information. It is possible, for example, to revise children's books and substitute sentences such as "See Mrs. Smith feed the children milk and cookies" with "See Mrs. Smith go to bed with the milkman." Yet print *allows* adults to control what and how much children know about adult situations. And general observation of social behavior suggests that when people can control access to private behaviors, they often do so. As television's exposure of adult secrets to children has bypassed the traditional censoring process, however, many authors have begun to include "adult" topics such as homosexuality, death, abortion, and prostitution in children's books.

[29]See the 1980 to 1983 editions of the *Nielsen Report on Television* (Northbrook, Ill.: A.C. Nielsen Co.) for recent levels of child viewing.

[30]Ibid., 1981, pp. 14-15.

[31]For examples of early studies that demonstrated this point, see Robert Lewis Shayon, *Television and Our Children* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1951), p. 27, and Hilde T. Himmelweit, A.N. Oppenheim, and Pamela Vince, *Television and the Child: An Empirical Study of the Effects of Television on the Young* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 13-15.

[32]James G. Webster and William C. Coscarelli, "The Relative Appeal to Children of Adult vs. Children's Television Programming," *Journal of Broadcasting* 23 (1979): 437-51.

[33]Charles Atkin found that about 30 percent of kindergarten through fifth-graders claimed they watch a national news program "almost every day." "Broadcast News Programming and Child Audience," *Journal of Broadcasting* 22 (1978): 47-61.

[34]See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), for a "dramaturgical" analysis of social interaction. For an extension of the model to an analysis of the effects of changes in media on a wide spectrum of social performances, see Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

[35]It would be possible, of course, for adults to choose to present on television only those programs that contain information available in traditional children's books. Yet, unlike books, television programs cannot be easily aimed at particular age groups. Adults must either abandon television to their youngest children or share most of their programs with children of all ages. The decision of what to put on television, then, parallels the speech and behavioral decisions of a large family that lives in one room: to control what a child of one age experiences is also to control the experience of the other children and adults, and almost any information suitable for older children and adults exposes young children to "adult secrets."

[36]*Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), translated by Robert Baldick.

[37]*The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[38]Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage*, pp. 14, 174.

[39]Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 119.

[40]Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage*, p. 405.

[41]Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Republic: The Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 85, 108.

42John Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982), pp. 145, 160.

43Ibid., pp. 136-47, 189-208.

44Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage*, pp. 449, 158, 216. For an analysis of the potential effects of literacy and electronic media on gender roles, see chapter 12 of Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place*.

45Sommerville, *The Rise and Fall of Childhood*, p. 136.

46Ibid., p. 182.

47Elisabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communication and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 432.

48Ibid., pp. 432-33.

49Of course, it is not the existence of literacy in and of itself that leads to "childhood" and "adulthood," but rather the increased possibilities that literacy affords for the *separation of adult and child information systems*. Because situation-separation is the key variable, we can see some evidence of distinctions in childhood and adulthood in various oral cultures where children are kept out of certain locations and discussions—but we do not see the division of childhood into thin year-by-year slices until the spread of literacy and the age-graded school. Conversely, even in literate societies, certain social conditions may override the distinctions in information systems that literacy makes possible. Thus, children were continued to be treated as "little adults" in many early American colonial settlements because harsh and primitive conditions made it difficult to isolate children. Similarly, childhood was "delayed" among the lower classes, not only by the slow spread of literacy, but also by crowded conditions and the lack of adult privacy. Childhood was also muted in many rural areas because children continued to work beside adults many hours a day and because the low density of the population often led to the mixing of ages in a one-room school.