



Mediated childhoods in multicultural families

The term mediated childhoods emphasizes the role of media and their importance for young people in everyday life and the need to understand today's childhood if we want to gain more knowledge about the role of media among young people. But we must also take into account the media in order to understand childhood. This working paper has aimed at understanding how families stranded between the Greek and Swedish cultures make use of various media in daily life. Several issues of relevance have been touched upon when trying to grasp the media practices among these families and the main research findings are summarized below.

1. What is it like to be a multicultural family in Europe today? How do the families talk about Swedish and Greek culture identity?

The Scandinavian church and the Swedish school in Piraeus/Athens are two significant places for the women in order to preserve Swedish identity and to feel a sense of belonging to the Swedish community. These two places are also mentioned by the children; where Swedish/Greek peers who are all growing up in multicultural families and share the experience of being bilingual and bicultural meet. The distinction between a non-ethnic "us" and ethnic "others" is often brought up for discussion in the fields of ethnicity and nationalism and the feeling of being different is mentioned by both the mothers and their children. However, it does not seem to constitute a major obstacle in their daily life in Greece. In contrast, this difference may be used as a positive feature among the children, of being someone special and being able to switch easily between being Swedish and Greek in terms of, for example, language, behaviour codes and norms. When the parents talked about their children's cultural identity several aspects were pointed out. There were those who emphasized their children's skills to switch between roles, whether they are in Sweden or Greece, while others said that their children perceived themselves as mainly Greek but that they will always have Swedish traits. The necessity for their children to have roots was also brought up by some parents so they would not feel split; it is in Greece where they live and have their friends. Compared to their children, the mothers talked about forgetting "how to behave" in certain situations or not knowing the latest gossip or news when meeting friends in Sweden. The Swedish mothers, who have lived between 10 and 26 years in Greece, also mentioned a changing relationship with Sweden as the years pass by. A relationship that, for example, became more intense and important the moment they had children. The use of various Swedish media then became an important means for developing and maintaining the children's Swedishness and their skills in Swedish (see further question four below).



2. What role do media have the first year in the new homeland? In what ways are media used to keep in contact with relatives and friends in Sweden and to inform oneself about the Swedish society?

Moving to another country involves a lot of challenges – to be placed in a new national, cultural, social, political context with its own specific belief systems and values. While **television** was the **easiest medium** to use in terms of understanding its contents at the beginning, it took much longer for the women to comprehend Greek newspapers. Even today, not all of them read newspapers. Watching old Greek films during the first years in Greece was a crucial way of learning the language.

When asked about how the women kept in contact with the family and friends in Sweden, the traditional telephone was mostly used. It was very common for them to talk to family members on a specific day in the week. E-mail and SMS were utilized to a much lesser extent. As for their children, they mainly have contact with the grandparents and cousins of the same age, and again the telephone was used for this purpose. Other means mentioned (but not as frequently as the telephone) were e-mail, SMS, ordinary postcards and letters.

Reading newspapers either in print or on the net was an important means of keeping oneself updated on various social and political events in Sweden among the interviewed women. While the interest and motivation of

Mediated childhoods in multicultural families

being updated varied among the women, they all asserted the necessity to know what takes place in one's home district. However, it is not only a matter of knowing about special events but also being updated on Swedish gossip among celebrities by reading different magazines. This gave the women an assurance that they knew the latest news when visiting Sweden. Other Swedish media mentioned and used were books, radio, video and television.

Much research has been conducted on the **role of television as a means of providing transnational bonding** for people living away from their homeland. In the study only one woman had access to a Swedish channel at home and the others did not show a great interest in watching Swedish television. The exception being events such as the Eurovision Song Contest, where the women gathered around the TV-set at the Scandinavian church.

Compared to the mothers, most of the children did not stress the importance of searching for information about different social and political events in Sweden. Even those young informants who emphasized their Swedishness said that they were more eager to know about Greek events as they live in Greece. Once again the importance of locality is brought up. One exception was the interest among the children to find out what Swedish peers think about various things in daily life and the Swedish children's magazine *Kamratposten* became a keyhole to the Swedish children's culture. This turns our attention to what type of Swedish media and media in general these young informants utilize in their daily life in Greece.

3. What is the media usage among young people?

Looking specifically at the usage of Swedish media, the children talked about how they read many more Swedish books and watched video films from Sweden when they were younger and then usually together with their mother, by growing up bilingually, these children mention how they get access to a wider range of media culture compared to Greek peers. Even if the young informants vary in their use of Swedish media, several of them utilized books, music, video films, and to a lesser



extent Swedish youth communities on the net and Swedish television programmes.

The media globalization that surrounds children today has been evident in this report. Drotner (2001: 283) asserts that *"Thus, today, the mediated formation of children's cultural identities is played out against ongoing and often contradictory revisions of received notions of both actual, geographical and virtual, symbolic boundaries"*. But as has been seen in this study, it is rather a mixture of international, Greek and Swedish media that are used by these children in their everyday culture; all depending on tastes, interests and cultural identity. Moreover, this study has shown that while children enjoy using global media output such as certain television programmes, music, computer games or books this does not automatically lead to a global cultural identity.

Looking more specifically at gender, one of the main differences is the younger boys' interests in sports, which in turn is reflected in their use of several media such as television programmes, computer games, internet, sports newspapers. These media, and their contents, are all a crucial part of the boys' peer culture.

While computer games are mainly a peer medium the television is a medium that gathers the family. The children enjoyed watching American or Greek films with the family or with friends. Beside films, favourite programmes involved mainly different series and soaps.

The books about Harry Potter have made the younger children more inclined to read books (especially about adventure) but also to watch the films and look at sites about Harry Potter on the net. Beside looking at sites related to one's interests (in sports, music, television programmes etc) the net is mainly used (by all young informants) for downloading or listening to music, searching for information for schoolwork. The exchange of e-mail is not so common with Greek peers as it is still rare to have internet access at home in Greece. The mobile phone has, on the hand, become a crucial means of communication for these young people. It is interwoven with their everyday culture and beside calling and sending SMS, collecting their own photos or exchanging pictures with friends is popular.



Mediated childhoods in multicultural families

When asked about their musical preferences, the mixture of Greek and American/English artists (to lesser extent Swedish ones) is evident. Compared to the books which the children read that are either international (mainly in Greek) or Swedish, the children mentioned a long list of Greek artists and groups that they enjoyed listening to.

4. How do parents perceive their children's media use?

The parents' concerns about their children's media use in the study exemplify both restrictive and non-restrictive mediation. It is the first type of mediation which dominates and involves the fear of one's children watching violent and uncensored news, having the TV on without watching something of interest, watching low quality soaps, or spending too much time on PlayStation or computer games, whereas they wish that their children would spend more time on books. When comparing Swedish and Greek media output, the violent contents of Greek television is pointed out by the parents (see below). In face the violent news is the main reason for not letting the children have their own television in their bedrooms.

Encouraging the children to utilize Swedish media was a way of reminding them that they are growing up with two cultures. This was especially significant when the children were younger and now as they have become older they are familiar with the Swedish media culture and have selected those parts that they find most appealing. The mothers mentioned how they used to read Swedish bedtime fairy tales and other children's books, sang Swedish children's songs and watched tapes containing Swedish films or programmes. But even today the use of Swedish media constitutes a crucial element in the maintenance of the Swedish cultural identity and the Swedish language.

5. How is the Greek media output valued in comparison with the Swedish media output?

When asked to compare Greek and Swedish media output several aspects were brought up by the parents and their children. The parents agreed that Greek television was much more violent, especially the news, which was also more entertaining and sensational than informative. The Greek public channels (ET-1 and NET) were preferred among all families when watching news or documentaries as they were more similar to Swedish public service.

But they would all like to see more foreign news on Greek television. Critical voices were also raised concerning the great number of low quality soaps and how women are represented on Greek television. Another issue discussed was that the media agenda in Greece is much more dominated and controlled by men, where, for example,

family oriented issues such as schooling and health are put in the background. Finally, the partisan nature of Greek media was brought up for discussion.

The children mainly discussed the difference between Swedish and Greek television. Both parents and children stressed the importance of more nationally produced children's programmes on Greek television and not merely American cartoons. Other aspects mentioned were the increasing number of commercials on Greek television and that its Swedish counterpart consists of more informative programmes.

The relevance of the conducted study lies in the limited research conducted in Sweden so far on the **role of media in citizenship, the formation of identity, and socio-cultural experiences** among Swedish families living abroad. Due to globalization and increasingly mobile Europeans much more knowledge is needed about these experiences; especially the **role of media** in these **intercultural encounters**. While migration scholarship increasingly emphasizes the transnational practices among immigrants and the way one makes use of multiple cultural repertoires in the host country, the role of media in this process is hardly mentioned (cf. Levitt, 2005). Living in an increasingly complex and interdependent world, new ways of understanding immigration experiences are needed. The two present projects "**Mediated childhoods in multicultural families in Greece**" and "**Media practices in the new country: children, youth, family and ethnicity**" both aim at grasping these experiences and the dynamics of cultural and mediated flows and the formation of social relations and identity in today's Europe.

References

- DROTNER K. (2001): Global media through youthful eyes. In: S. Livingstone & M. Bovill (Eds.), *Children and their changing media environment: a European comparative study* (pp. 283–305), New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates
- LEVITT P. (2005): Buildings bridges. What immigration scholarship and cultural sociology have to say to each other: *Poetics*, 33, 49–62

Chapter 5 of the study "Mediated childhoods in multicultural families in Greece", A working paper. Media and Communication Studies, by Ulrika Sjöberg.

Ulrika Sjöberg is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at Halmstad University, Sweden. Her teaching areas involve media education, media studies, audience research and methodology. Her research covers issues related to the social context of electronic media use and the meanings created from media by young media users in daily life and the role of media among families with immigrant backgrounds.