

Parents' attitudes towards children's TV consumption: Mediation styles

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Abstract: The most recent studies on child audiences highlight the paramount importance of parents in determining the impact television content may have on children's development. This article presents the results of a research study focused on describing and classifying the different styles of parental mediation in children's television consumption. This study is based on 48 in-depth interviews applied to parents from the Community of Madrid who have children aged 4 to 12 years. The detailed study of the indicators derived from the literature review (such as TV viewing control measures, co-viewing and perceptions about television) has allowed us to identify four parental mediation styles and to conclude that parental mediation is very simplified and reduced to its normative dimension.

Keywords: Television; childhood; parents; parental mediation; reception context; child development.

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1. Introduction

Unlike other media such as radio, print press, cinema and even the Internet, virtually since the emergence of television its increased supply and consumption [1] has been linked to a process of social delegitimation that has generated a set of enduring negative images about the medium in the collective consciousness. Negative critical

thinking about television has been characteristic of Spain and has intensified since the 1990s with the arrival of private broadcasters who have introduced television to the competitive market where profitability, in terms of audience share, is what prevails.

Concerns about television intensify when it comes to child audiences and programming. These concerns revolve around the possible effects of television programming in children, due to the potential of the medium to influence the perception of reality and the adoption of attitudes or values.

Apart from these perceptions about television, several studies have found that children's programming is insufficient and of poor quality, that most children's shows are old Japanese or American productions, that the relation between the supply and demand of children's television is inadequate, that children mainly consume TV content for adults in night time slots, and that television reduces the time children use for other activities like homework (Nuñez-Ladevéze and Pérez-Ornia, 2002, 2003 and 2006; Garitaonandia, Fernández and Olea, 2005; Callejo, 2008; Vázquez, 2009).

We cannot overlook the fact that the television set still plays the protagonist role in households and the routines of children, despite the recent emergence of new children-friendly screens and despite the fact that children are being the driving force and fundamental piece in the process of adaptation and assimilation of new ICT technologies at home (Torrecillas, 2012).

The previous assertion has been verified by several reports, including the *Barlovento Comunicación* (2011), which confirms that television consumption in Spanish households has reached a new historical high: 239 minutes of television viewing per person per day. This is the third consecutive year of increase in consumption time, which makes clear that the emergence of multi screens do not affect television, but on the contrary, they feed back the audiovisual TV content. Moreover, children use the Internet to look for content related to their favourite television series and characters (Vázquez, 2010).

The results presented in this article are part of an R&D project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology: *Producción de los contextos de recepción de la audiencia infantil en España: el lugar de la familia* ("Production of the reception contexts of child audiences in Spain: the family place"). This wider research has been developed by the Communication and Childhood Studies and Research Centre (*CEICIN*) and directed by Professor Luis Núñez-Ladevéze (San Pablo-CEU University). This research project has also had the participation of Professor Javier Callejo-Gallego (Ph.D.) as expert in qualitative methodology (National Distance Education University, Spain).

This project, instead of accusing television of being responsible for most of the problems confronting young people in our society, aims to approach the subject matter from a broader and more dynamic perspective that takes into account the subjective and personal particularities of the television audience, including its child sector. This is part of a line of research focused on “specific reception situations and contexts”, like the family television viewing (Aparici *et al.*, 1994: 2).

The objective is to go beyond an exclusively descriptive study of child audiences (what do they watch? at what time?) and to integrate fundamental aspects into the research in order to empirically understand the relations generated between television and children, who are considered as active subjects who consume television in a family environment. We can speak of a conception of communication as a much more complex process that involves several elements that act as filters between the sender and the receiver. This leads to the need to examine the family context as a structural determining factor where we can examine the specific dynamics of the effects in relation to the relations between children and television.

After examining the importance of the family institution as a context in which children establish relations with television and as a filter that mediates the possible influences of the medium, this article reviews previous studies on parental mediation and strategies deployed at home, with the objective of justifying the construction of our object of study: to establish a typology of parental mediation styles in children’s television consumption. Before that the article explains its methodology and the analysis indicators derived from the previous theoretical framework.

In comparison to other studies with similar objects of study (which will be discussed later), this research aims to go one step further by deepening in the analysis of parental mediation styles and by trying to understand their components and motivations.

One of the main hypotheses underpinning this research is that the ways in which children consume television are conditioned by the way in which parents intervene in that use and consumption of television. The specific hypotheses that this article tries to test are:

- H.1: Mediation strategies or styles are based on parents’ depiction, valuation and perception of television.
- H.2: The depiction, evaluation and perception of television are socially constructed and for this reason the family’s position in the social structure can trigger different modes of parental mediation and, therefore, different forms of television reception by children.

2. Three-way relation between parents, children and television

There are numerous studies on the impact of television (on school performance, family communication and the inducement of certain content to violence) that have tried to study the effects in an isolated manner and have ignored such important issues as the role of the family as a reception context for children's television viewing.

After some Anglo-Saxon research studies showed the inadequacies of the hypodermic approaches to the effects problem (Young, 1969), most works on television reception have been based on the idea that, in general, children need their parents to cope with the current media landscape (Livingstone, 2007). The meaning of the messages directed to children is, undoubtedly, part of the features of the text, but the meaning that these messages acquire in children's minds is not monocausal, but conditioned by their biological characteristics and the characteristics of the reception context in which the three-way relation between parents, children and television becomes an explanatory model that cannot be ignored.

In the last 25 years some major works have been developed in Spain from this perspective which considers that “text and context, message and reception conditions form an inseparable pairings in the interpretation of television content” (Pindado, 1997: 63) [2]. However, as we will see in the next section, there is still some way to go in the research of these matters in Spain.

The line of research resumed in this work, unlike other perspectives influenced by behaviourism –which has tried for many years to explain psychological changes and development without taking into account relations with the environment-, is based on emerging theories (epigenesis) that understand child development as an open and flexible process that cannot be studied in isolation but rather “as a process resulting from a constant exchange between the subject and the environment” (Martí, 2005: 140). The social ecological perspective sees the environment or context in which the person lives as a constitutive element that explains human behaviour. Therefore, in the field of communication, this perspective could help us to approach the influence of television content in children.

From this line of research, television, as a socialisation agent with an indisputable protagonism in the routines of children [3], does not act in a vacuum and cannot be studied in isolation. The fundamental concept in the field of television reception is mediation, which is understood as a “cultural instance in which media audiences produce and appropriate the meaning and sense of the communicative process” (Martín-Barbero, 1987) and as a “structuring process that configures and reconfigures the interaction of the audiences with television as well as their meaning creation in

that interaction” (Orozco, 1996: 74). In the case of child audiences the natural and usual scenario in which the reception of television occurs is the family place:

“The family is the natural group to watch television. It is the first scenario for the appropriation of content. The family has its own ‘sphere of signification’, which is the result of its particular historicity and institutional status, which are used to give relevance to the *scripts* [4] of the audience members and to legitimise their performance in social scenarios” (Orozco, 1996: 41).

From the network of mediation agents that participate in the life of children - family, peers, school, the media and culture in its broadest sense-, the family, in addition to being the context in which the interaction between children and television develops and where the assimilation of meanings by child audiences originates, is the institution entrusted with the basic function of socialising children. Due to their position in the social structure, parents are thus expected to introduce children to the cultural patterns of the social model in which families revolve.

In other words, parents are responsible for children’s education, which is understood as the “transmission of values, knowledge, skills and patterns of behaviour” (Barrios, 1992: 19), aimed at achieving the correct social integration of children and the acquisition of a solid identity that promotes personal fulfilment.

Parents must act as filters and monitor the influences of the other mediation agents that participate in children’s everyday lives, including television, especially when television’s messages and parents’ criteria differ. Television’s ability to affect people cannot be underestimated due to the intense and suggestive ways with which television communicates its messages to children and teenagers [5] and the constant satisfaction generated by television viewing.

“It is necessary, therefore, to understand the television environment as a stimulating environment that transmits information in new ways, and to analyse the various mechanisms and modalities in which the culturally-mediated information is presented” (De-Río and Álvarez, 2004: 109).

Children should receive the necessary education from their family so that they can later contextualise the analysis of television in its technological, linguistic, semiological and sociological dimensions; “hence it is important for the family to provide a context that guarantees an enriching experience as viewers” (Ferrés: 2000, 133). Ferrés blames parents of not playing their respective role in the education of

their children as viewers and also of not protesting, demanding or denouncing the practices of the television industry that they consider inappropriate (2005: 241).

In the context of TV viewing, parents are potentially the socialisation agents that are closest and more direct to children and for this reason “it is not possible to properly understand the television-children relation if we overlook the family place as a natural space for this relation” (Bringué and De-los-Ángeles, 2000: 42). In the negotiation process that the child establishes with television, family is fundamental for children to fully accept the proposed meanings, to modify the preferred meaning or to make an oppositional interpretation (Morley, 1996: 130).

Ultimately, all consulted researchers agree that the effects, both positive and negative, depend on the way in which the family acts as a mediating filter (Gabelas and Marta-Lazo, 2008).

“Research warns us that the children that come off best from their relation with television are those whose parents deploy more interaction-triangulation strategies with them and the television screen” (Del-Río and Álvarez, 2004: 286).

From this point onwards, the research focuses on parents as potential mediators in the children-television relation. “It is important to acknowledge the causal relation between television, family and children” (Callejo, 2004: 16), without forgetting the schools where parents seek support for the media education of their children.

2.2. Parental mediation in children's TV viewing habits

Our line of research, which focused, among other aspects, on the identification of different types of mediation based on indicators such as the degree of family TV consumption, parental control, co-viewing and dialogue about TV content, has important Anglo-Saxon precedents. One of these precedents is the study of Abelman and Pettey (1989: 253), who proposed three types of mediation: the restrictive strategy; which is based on the establishment of norms; the evaluative strategy, which is when parents watch and criticise TV contents with their children; and the unfocused mediation, when there is little parental participation in children’s television use and consumption.

In Spain, the development of research on children’s television reception has been slow and belated but very fruitful in recent years. An important precedent in Spain is the work of Aparici *et al.* (1994), who based on the analysis of focus groups, TV contents,

levels of child audiences, and broadcast schedules, detected “the lack of interest and permissiveness of some parents, which was reflected in the indiscriminate consumption of television by their children” (1994: 1). Consulted children confirmed that they watched TV without any kind of paternal control. This study strengthened research on television reception contexts, with particular focus on school, in addition to the family (Aguaded and Diaz-Gómez, 2008).

Three years later, García-Cortázar *et al.* (1998) corroborated the absence of parental norms about television viewing and confirmed that there are trends that decrease the strength of these norms: the individualisation of family relations, the belief that the child-TV relationship is natural, and the contradictions of parents towards television (parents do not always act in the same way towards television), among others.

These researchers took a step further by identifying three styles of parental mediation that reflected the degree and form of the control exercised by parents, and took into account, among other criteria, the socio economic level/class (low, low-middle, middle-middle, upper-middle, etc.) of the families under study. The parental mediation styles identified were: hetero-control, typical of the low-middle classes and characterised by a widespread presence of parents; self-control, typical of the high-middle classes and characterised by a low parental intervention; and lack of control, typical of the popular classes which barely control children’s television use.

In the same line of thought, Vílchez-Martín (1999) argues that the effects that television exposure may have on children depend on the quality of parental mediation. Vílchez-Martín detected incongruence between what parents thought children should watch on TV and children’s actual performance. This author also establishes a qualitative typology of parental mediation styles: didactic, strict, comfortable and paternal.

Based on the review of research in this field, Llopis points out that “the control and the use of television depend on the parental mediation model, i.e. the educational strategies parents use on a daily basis to regulate children’s consumption of television” (2004: 129-130). This author offers another typology of mediation models, which consisting of: controlling-restrictive families, whose mediation is based on the control of consumption; permissive families, characterised by the absence of mediation strategies; and guiding families, whose mediation is based on guiding and co-viewing.

From another perspective, one of the main contributions of Núñez-Ladevéze is the concept of pragmatic dissonance [6]:

“The idea is to contrast the normative criteria expressed by parents about how they should control what their children watch and what they think children should not watch and the actual behaviour, i.e. the actual way parents attend their children and what children watch or stop watching as a result” (2002: 139).

The result is that in all households there is some kind of dissonance or inconsistency between the criteria and behaviours of parents.

The most recently published research work is *La generación interactiva en Madrid* (The Interactive Generation in Madrid), which questioned 1500 children from the Community of Madrid about, among other aspects, the parental mediation of television viewing. The participating children stated that they enjoyed great freedom to watch television: 61.7% of them enjoy total freedom in the use and consumption of television (Bingué and Sádaba, 2011).

At this stage of the research, we want to follow the line developed by García-Cortázar and his team and by Llopis, who have established different types of mediation styles based on parental mediation strategies. The contribution of this work lies in its attempt to go deeper into the phenomenon by going beyond the description of mediation strategies and by examining the perception and depiction of television in order to, in addition to describe the mediation styles, delve into the explanation of what motivates each of these styles.

3. Method

This article disseminates the results of an exploratory empirical study aimed at better understanding parental mediation and establishing a typology of families according to the mediation styles used in children’s television consumption. This research was developed with a qualitative methodology, namely the in-depth interview.

The selection of the research method was determined by the nature of the research: a reception study that aims to understand the processes experienced by audiences in their relation with television (Callejo, 2001: 120). The selected method is the most appropriate when the objective is not to quantify behaviours or opinions but to understand the processes that lead to different types of mediation, based on parents’ perception, description and valuation of television, which leads to different child television reception contexts.

The qualitative interview allows us to observe, at the ontological level, how parents behave in relation to their children's use of television and to better understand the meaning that parents give to the way they intervene in the relation their children establish with television. At the epistemological level, we do not aim to formulate inexistent universal laws to govern the interaction between parents and children, but to make abstractions and generalisations based on the value, meaning and purpose that parents give to the way they mediate, or not, their children's use of television. And therefore, at the methodological level, the qualitative interview was selected because it allows the researcher to establish contact with the subject under study and to obtain the desired information through interaction with it.

Quantitative techniques like the survey can be used in later stages of the research to determine the extent to what the different mediation styles are used across the population at large.

3.1. Sample design

The sample is composed of 48 families with children aged between 4 and 12 years and living in the Community of Madrid.

The selection of the sample was based on the following criteria:

- Position in the social structure: four family models were identified according to their socio economic level/class (low, low-middle, middle-middle and upper-middle).
- Number of children: families were divided into those with a single child and those with two or more children.
- Characteristics of parents: the sample distinguished those families in which only one parent works outside the home from those in which both parents work outside the home.

3.1.1. Justification for the sample selection

The main criterion for the construction of the sample, derived from the initial hypothesis, is the socio-economic level. This is because British cultural studies (Morley, Lull), which provide some of the theoretical foundations of this research, have shown that each social group adopts different forms of identity decomposition/re-

composition and that this is necessary to understand the different cultural consumptions or media pleasures (Matterlart and Neveu, 2004: 92). These cultural studies focus on the popular classes and on how their value systems and representations are vital to accept or reject dominant ideas.

In relation to the media, this school of research focuses on studying audiences' decoding of messages and defends the idea that there are different ways of watching television according to the cultural roots of the audiences which triggers different experiences, perceptions and representations in relation to television (Hall, 2004). Therefore, to understand these ways of watching television we must take into account the characteristics of the text but, above all, the cultural origins of the receiver, which must be studied from the sociological point of view (Morley, 1992). This is why the position in the social structure acquires importance as an explanatory element in our work.

We consider the social stratification as a reflection of the group differences that generate shared identities and lifestyles in differentiated consumption contexts and as an idea that affects the operative symbolic universe and mental structures of social groups. In this study, we distinguish social groups that share lifestyles, which are determined by the education and occupation of the parents, income level and place of residence. We believe that these indicators lead to different forms of consumption and different strategies of meaning projection in relation to television.

Similar to Callejo in *La Audiencia Activa* (The active audience) [7], the reason for the inclusion of this criterion is that people give subjective meanings to and make appropriations of television depending on the social sector in which they are immersed, understood as groups of people with certain conditions of existence and certain practices (1995). Based on an in-depth study of the meaning of the relations of the audience with the small screen, Callejo highlights the need for examining the influence of social class in television viewing: "Each social sector speaks of television according to their culture, (...) each subculture relates in a different way with language and television" (1995: 256-257).

3.1.2. Substantive representativeness

With regards to the construction of the qualitative sample we would like to note that the representativeness is based on structural criteria (Callejo: 2001, 131). The study did not aim to achieve a proper and statistical ratio between the sample and the universe, but to take into account the criteria, behaviours and discourses of the main sectors of the population, which are our objects of study. We have used the principle

of substantive representativeness in order to cover the variety of social situations, rather than reproducing the characteristics of the population on a reduced scale. The starting point is the individual; the criterion is centred on the participants and not on the variables.

3.2. Phases of research

This research has been developed in five phases:

- Design:

This research is based on the development of the R&D project mentioned in the introduction of the article.

- Preliminary analysis:

This stage focused on justifying the construction of the object of study based on a conclusive literature that would allow contextualising the research and analysing the state-of-the-art in this line of research.

- Review of the methodological design:

In addition to the construction of the sample, the study included the identification of indicators that would be the subject of study and the preparation of the interview script. The indicators selected to describe parental mediation are: physical characteristics of the TV watching environment –features and location of television sets-; degree of TV consumption in the family; knowledge of television and its content; suggestions, tips and alternatives offered to children; co-viewing and dialogue; prohibitions and norms; control measures and impediments. The indicators studied to try to explain mediation were paternal description of television -general criteria, evaluation of the influences and assessment of educational use- and parental perception of the content watched by children and the consumption time.

The interview was divided into four sections: family identification data; lifestyles; parents' relation with television, and children's relation with television. Each section included several questions aimed at investigating the corresponding indicators.

- Field work:

The selection of families was conducted with the snowball technique. In some cases the researcher identified the family profiles necessary to obtain the sample directly on the street. After families were first contacted, via telephone or in person, they were visited in their homes (after they agreed to it) with the intention of making participants feel comfortable and get to know first-hand the physical characteristics of the environment where children watch television. The first round of interviews was conducted from November to February, 2008, and the second one between April and June, 2010. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The shortest interviews were those answered by the lowest social classes, which seems to confirm the wisdom of the criteria used to select the sample, at least in relation to the construction of discourses about television. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

- Analysis and interpretation:

The data was analysed and classified with two purpose-created databases. The first database contained all transcripts and classified the information into different family profiles, while the second one included the information for each category in a unified manner to enable the comparative study.

- Detail of the results and conclusions:

After the information was sorted, the description and interpretation of data was conducted.

4. Contexts of children's television reception

We examined five aspects that we consider fundamental to describe the contexts of children's television reception.

- Consumption scenario: physical features of the space where the child-TV relationship takes place: number and location of television sets.
- Situational scenario: situation in terms of presence or absence of other family members in children's television reception: number of children, parents' job schedules, and supervision of children by third persons.
- Parental mediation: patterns of interaction between children and parents about television.

- Children's effective behaviour: Children's actual use and consumption of television.
- Characteristics of the content watched by children: TV content transmitted by different networks and programming schedules. Meaning and significance of the messages transmitted by programmes and consumed by children; the transmitted audiovisual narratives, values and stereotypes.

Although this study does not aim to describe the television reception contexts as basic units of analysis of the child-TV relation -specific and particular scenarios where the behaviour of a particular audience sector and the possible influences of television can be observed-, it is important to point out that these contexts are very complex and increasingly individualised.

There are some realities that corroborate this assertion, like the fact that in contrast to the traditional family character of television its current consumption is increasingly individualised and the fact that the current model of television is characterised by the fragmentation of the supply as a result of the introduction of Digital Terrestrial Television, which means that there is one television set and one television signal for every viewer, including children. This reality highlights the difficulty of this type of studies that aim to unify perceptions and behaviours, and to describe trends.

4.1. Television interaction models between parents and children

Of all the elements involved in children's television reception, parental mediation is the most important because, in addition to conditioning the consumption scenario, the situational scenario, and children's effective behaviour, parents are responsible, more than the television industry and its content policies, for educating their children in the use of television, as it has been justified in the theoretical framework.

The great challenge for the parents is to properly manage the household's physical conditions -number and place of TV sets- and their children's intellectual capacity - skills to interact with messages- that can counteract the undisputed socialising power of television

Parental mediation is the term used in this study to refer to the way in which parents intervene in the relation their children establish with television. One of the first realities that has been identified through the analysis of the in-depth interviews is that in the exercise of parental mediation parents combine the preferred mediation, which

is the behaviour parents believe children should exhibit in the use of television, with the effective mediation, which is the actual way in which parents regulate their children's use of television, based on parents' actual perception of television. The study of effective mediation allows us to describe mediation and to establish typologies of mediation styles or strategies, while the study of the preferred mediation allows us to understand and explain the effective mediation.

Despite the aforementioned individualisation of the reception contexts we have detected four models of interaction between parents and children in relation to television, based on the detailed study of each indicator of effective mediation: self-control, hetero-control, control, and lack of control; of which the hetero-control is the predominant mediation style.

In relation to the first hypothesis, it is worth noting that the indicators of the preferred mediation explain the effective mediation. On the other hand, in relation to the second hypothesis, it is worth noting that the methodological approach, the sample size and especially the fragmentation that characterises the current society have not allowed us to establish a clear association between the family's position in the social structure and its mediation style but have allowed us to identify behaviours that are more or less homogeneous in the studied social groups. These mediation styles are explained below.

4.1.1. Hetero-control

In this study, hetero-control refers to a mediation model in which control strategies are limited to the establishment of norms about the use and consumption of television by children. This restrictive television interaction model is the most predominant.

In the majority of cases the norms are imposed when parents detect a misuse of television, mainly the watching of sexual or violent scenes and excessive watching. There are few cases in which the behaviour rules are consistent and stable. The rules only limit the viewing times or prohibit the viewing of certain programmes that are considered inadequate, mainly celebrity/gossip and reality TV shows.

The parents that apply this mediation style have a house highly equipped with technologies, like Internet, video game consoles, and TV sets, which are the technologies most commonly used by children. The study has verified that in these families children are increasingly making an autonomous and personal use of television, which is usually located in a small room devoted to children's entertainment. Parents confirm that small children who have no duties watch

children's channels in the afternoons during weekdays and most of the weekends. In the case of children who attend school and have to do homework, parents are restrictive during the weekdays and give greater freedom for TV consumption on the weekends.

This type of parents admitted that they ignore what kind of programmes their children watch, especially when it comes to children's programmes such as cartoons. However, parents do believe that children's programming (scarce, according to them) is suitable for their children's age. These parents know very well the night time programming and although in many cases they do not watch TV with their children they know what their children are watching at these times. In these families advices and suggestions are generally scarce but are produced as a result of TV co-viewing.

Despite television consumption is generally high in these families, parents are very aware of the need to mediate and become stricter in the use and consumption of television. The quality of the mediation is another issue. In families in which one parent stays at home with the children, there is control over the television content that is watched and a high degree of co-viewing. These stay-at-home parents encourage their children to watch useful and educational programmes and prohibit the watching of reality and celebrity/gossip shows. Scenes of sex and violence are also prohibited: "Anything related to sex or violence and things I consider inappropriate are prohibited" (middle-middle-class mother of from the Metropolitan Area of Madrid).

In the case of families in which both parents work, parents cannot exercise the control they would like. Even so, they try to make their children watch useful programmes, totally prohibit programmes that do not contribute to their children's education and limit the consumption time: "In principle there is an unwritten rule that says that TV should not be turned on" (middle-middle class parent from the Metropolitan Area of Madrid). In these families parents establish control measures: when they are at home they supervise their children's TV consumption and act if necessary, and when they are outside the house they leave clear TV time and content restrictions to their children's caretakers.

In these families parents have a very negative concept of television. They believe that the quality of the television content is poor, although their criticisms are directed to the content and not to the medium itself, which implies certain desire for improvement. The watching of age-inappropriate TV content by children is perceived as a problem by these parents because they are aware of the protagonism of television in their children's development and especially their values, language and dressing choices. These parents are aware of the influential power of television on their children, mainly in households in which only one parent works. They have a specific and inclusive

perception of the influences of television. A mother stated: “I think it is very influential, they take it as a model of behaviour” (mother from Madrid).

For these parents, television is not an accessory device and it would be a beneficial instrument if the quality of its content were good. They believe that television should be a window to the reality to which their children do not have access and a useful tool they can entrust to children when necessary.

These families do consider that television might have an educational use, and actually feel betrayed because television does not meet its real functions: information, which is the most-valued function, and education. These parents are very sceptical about the possible improvement of television. In short, they are aware of the need for mediation but recognise multiple impediments to properly exercise it, from the impossibility of being always present when children watch TV to the hard-to-avoid socialising power of television that influences parents themselves.

These ideas make parents be much more restrictive and that is why the type of mediation they exercise is hetero-control: parents adopt a watchful attitude towards the relationship between their children and television, with attitudes ranging from advices to orders. This predominant style of mediation is characteristic of the middle-middle classes, particularly those where one parent, usually the mother, is at home while children enjoy their free time.

4.1.2. Self-control

This style of mediation consists in not intervening in the relation that children establish with television based on the idea that children are sufficiently educated and trained to make a responsible use of this medium and thus should not be directly influenced by contents that might be considered harmful to their development.

This mediation style is adopted in households where the implementation of ICTs is very high and television is just another technological device. These households have one or two TV sets, one in the living room and another in the kitchen or the secondary room. They do not have TV in the bedroom with the exception of screens exclusively intended for video-game consoles.

Although the overall TV consumption is generally high in the Spanish society, it is low when compared with the rest of the studied families. During the weekdays the priority of children is to do homework and studying, but they can watch television when they complied with this obligation. Children watch more TV on the weekend,

which is traditionally devoted to rest and leisure, and parents are not concerned about it: “what she does is to watch television in excess during the weekend” (upper-middle-class mum from Madrid).

These children enjoy quite a few alternatives to television both inside and outside their home, which favours a greater distance between children and television. In the first case it is because during the workweek they have activities after school and in the second because, as they live in a more equipped home, they can use other technologies to entertain themselves, like the Internet. Even so, parents believe children should watch less television. Suggestions and guidelines are very scarce and improvised according to the content watched in family, and can lead parents to initiate instructive conversations.

These parents are selective in the consumption of television, know the programming schedule and the time their children dedicate to watch television, but are unaware of the content watched by children and fully trust the appropriateness of the content advertised as children’s programming. There are no prohibitions or norms in their homes because they think that if the content is really inadequate, their children will change the channel, which is based on their firm belief that their children also watch television in a selective manner, to entertain themselves, and that they maintain a significant distance from the medium and that this makes them immune against its possible negative influences. “They have no restrictions (...) They restrict themselves” (upper-middle class mum from the Metropolitan Area of Madrid).

In these families there are some rules that are taken for granted and do not lead to conflicts. For instance, if scenes of explicit sex or violence appear on the TV the channel is changed. In these families the co-viewing is scarce; parents and children rarely watch the family night time slot because the smallest members, of up to 7 or 8 years or aged, go to bed early and because older children use other technologies or watch television in other rooms. When parents watch television with children, the former aims to select appropriate contents and to avoid reality and celebrity/gossip shows. Media literacy strategies are not explicit or direct.

The explanation lies in the ideas that these parents have about television. They have a very negative concept of television: “It is not that its quality is bad but that it is pretty rubbish” (mother from Madrid). These parents believe that television tries to manipulate people -but that this only happens with the least educated viewers- and that it is moved by commercial interests. They watch television as a source of positive and negative influences, but always impute these influences to others never to themselves: they have an abstract exclusionary perception of these influences: “Television influences children in general, in their way of speaking, dressing and behaving... but

the television we currently watch at home does not influences us” (upper-middle-class mum from the Metropolitan Area of Madrid).

The style of mediation that prevails in the upper-middle and middle-middle classes in which both parents work. The peculiarity of these families is that they do not see television as a problem because they see it as a completely dispensable instrument that they can use as they wish to obtain entertainment and information.

Unlike other families, for this type family television is not the only medium of entertainment and information, because their purchasing power allows them to enjoy other activities such as going out, traveling, going to the theatre, practicing sports or extracurricular activities, in the case of children, and because they also consume print media and radio, which they perceive as more credible, and have access to other information channels like their working and social environments. They do not consider that television is or can be an educational medium in itself. For them television can become a complementary education instrument in very specific cases.

The level of education of these families gives them leads them to have strong criteria and convictions. These parents feel that they have a solid education and the capacity to transmit it to children. They trust in education their children are receiving. They also trust themselves as free subjects able to choose the most suited content from all the options. Hence the type of mediation exercised by these parents is self-control: they trust that the education their children are receiving enables them to use television responsibly.

4.1.3. Control

This type of mediation involves a relative supervision of children’s TV consumption, the absence of explicit rules and the use of total or partial prohibitions when parents detect an inappropriate use of television. This type of mediation occurs in homes which have a limited variety of technological equipment but a protagonist presence of television, according to the number and location of television sets at home.

This style of mediation is typical of the low-middle class families. The most significant finding is that in all visited families from the most unprivileged classes there was a television in the children’s room. This situation favours the individualised use of television by children and contributes to the decreasing in parents’ mediating responsibility because children see their room as a private space in which parents’ normative capacity is lower, when it exists. Alternatives to television are scarce both

inside and outside the home and for this reason television becomes one of the major sources of entertainment for children, mainly in the weekdays.

It can be affirmed that these types of households encourage children to stay at home watching television because parents do not want their children to be on the street and face its dangers. Parents see television as an ally; a way to protect their children. These parents are heavy television viewers who do not criticise any genre or format, except for scenes of sex or violence, which is common in all households.

These types of parents do not offer advice or alternatives are talk about contents but not about their suitability or quality. There is a high degree of co-viewing. There are no explicit rules, with the exception of taking homework as a priority. On the other hand, there are partial prohibitions related to inappropriate scenes: “For example, in the show *Sucedió en Madrid* [It happened in Madrid] a father stabbed his daughter in the parking lot (...) I do not want to know about that and I do not want my children to hear about it neither” (low-middle class mum). Control measures are very scarce and the main impediment is being away from home to exercise the mediation.

Despite of not delegitimising any specific format, low-middle-class parents do criticise television in general terms. They say they do not know whether the quality of television is good or bad but affirm that they dislike it, what makes us think that they are aware of the social delegitimation of television but have not appropriated or understood this discourse. They do not have a clear idea about what would be the ideal television content for them or what is needed to improve the medium.

They believe that television is influencing their children; they have a specific inclusive perception of the influence of television, mainly of advertising, in consumption and aggressiveness. In television, series and advertising, children see lifestyles that they want to imitate in real life but face the problem that their families cannot afford the spending that copying these lifestyles would involve. “It is very influential. In Christmas there is all the publicity, and of course they want all the gifts that appear in television. If they would not watch that on the TV they would not want them” (low-middle class mum from Madrid). They also criticise the informative manipulation. For them, television has little credibility and tries to confuse people.

Low-middle class parents believe that the poor quality of television is a problem because they see television a chance to learn, a window to the world for all those who have not had access to travelling due to their poor education and experiences. They believe that when television is properly used it can be an instrument that can favour the development of the mind. They assess positively the educational use of television.

The main difference with other families is their mediation style. The truth is that they do not feel the need to control television content their children watch because they are not very aware about the need to mediate nor have a clear perception of the possible influences of television on their children. Their children are not given clear rules or prohibitions about television, its contents or schedules. These rules are improvised when parents detect a misuse of television. Parents only worry that their children meeting school obligations so they limit TV consumption time in weekdays and cut scenes of explicit sex or violence when children are present. Parents exercise mediate but without getting too involved in the relation between children and television.

4.1.4. Lack of control

This type of families does not exercise any type of mediation and mostly belong to the lower social classes.

In these households television is the only medium of communication. These families consume a lot of television because they have few recreational alternatives outside and inside the home. The study found that mothers who do not work outside the home watch television with their children so they know the same contents.

These families talk a lot about the successful series or shows that they usually watch but not about the suitability of TV contents. Co-viewing is very high but parents do not establish any prohibition or rule on television: “Since I never see anything wrong, I never forbid my child to watch any programme” (low-class mum from Madrid). Virtually, these parents do not criticise any TV content, with the exception of excessively violent scenes.

Low-class families are not worried about anything related to television, with the exception of violence and the impact it may have on their children. These parents criticise the excess of celebrity/gossip shows to the detriment of other genres and would appreciate very positively the transmission of programmes that would try to educate children and would also educate parents on how to educate their children.

These parents have not thought about the possible influence of television. Most of them do not know how to answer questions related to the influences of the media nor understand very well the concept of influence over child development. They only have a remote notion of these issues. Apart from the incitement to violence, they do think about the incitement to consumption. “I believe that it influences them. News about violence and violent movies. I have noticed that he likes action films too much” (low-class dad from Madrid’s *Centro* district).

In general, in low-class families television is a socialising device so they cannot completely get by without it. At the same time, for low-class families, television serves to entertain children. Parents prefer their children to be at home watching television rather than on the street, with the dangers posed by their neighbourhoods. These are families without specific criteria about television and children because television is not a problem for them.

Mediation style exercised lacks control: parents have a permissive attitude; they hardly intervene in the relationship between children and television.

5. Conclusions

This qualitative study has delved into parental mediation as a constitutive element of the different reception contexts in which children consume television. We have defined the parental mediation as the degree and the way in which parents are involved in the relations that children establish with television.

Based on the study of all the designated indicators, four styles of mediation of children's television consumption have been described and explained: self-control, hetero-control, control and lack of control. The most predominant mediation style in households is hetero-control, characterised by a high degree of intervention in the relations children establish with television, exercised with partial rules that arise from control and co-viewing moments and revolve around consumption times, contents deemed inappropriate due to their inclusion of sexual or violent scenes, and formats such as reality or celebrity/gossip shows.

It can be affirmed that, in general terms, mediation is reduced to the existence, or lack thereof, of control measures (hence the name given to each style of mediation), which in the majority of cases are improvised when parents realise that their children are viewing something deemed inappropriate. Stable and consistent norms that leave a mark on the behaviour of children towards television are scarce. Mediation is characterised by low parental participation in children's television reception but mediation cannot be reduced to its normative dimension.

Mediation, aside from the established typology, is characterised by parents' lack of advice or suggestions to their children about television. Alternatives to television within the household are also scarce. When parents order their children to turn off the television they do not offer alternatives within or outside the medium. The alternatives outside the home depend on the purchasing power of families. The co-viewing is

scarce throughout the day and is, paradoxically, restricted to the schedule preferred by adults (parents or older siblings), so children watch age-inappropriate content with the consent of adults. And since there is no much co-viewing, dialogue about television is virtually non-existent.

The reasons for this have to do with preferred mediation, i.e. the ideals that parents have about television in their resolute predispositions. Worthy of note is the relativisation of the possible influences of television in their homes. Parents are very aware of the social delegitimation of television and know very well the discourse of the social imaginary about television but have not identified with it and exclude themselves and their families from the sustained ideas.

After this general diagnostic it would be necessary to encourage active mediation, i.e. a mediation style in which parents are involved in instructing, guiding and controlling their children's use and consumption of television. The starting point is awareness, which clearly requires parents to have a good education so that they can later educate their children. The key to active mediation is parents' media literacy, based on which they can establish rules of behaviour in relation to television, monitor and control their children's use of television, and get involved in their children's media literacy.

In short, this line of research should be directed to the study of the skills that parents have to develop to be able to exercise active mediation, the competences that should be taught to children, and the appropriate channels for the transmission of this knowledge, especially in a media environment that is increasingly complex media in terms of communication and information technologies at home [8].

* This article is part the research project entitled *Producción de contextos de recepción de la audiencia infantil en España: el lugar de la familia* ("Production of the reception contexts of child audiences in Spain: the family place") ([SEJ2005-05805](#)), which is funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology. The researcher in charge of this study is Professor Luis Núñez-Ladevéze. The author of this article continues this line of research as the main researcher of a project funded by the San Pablo-CEU University: *La familia frente al desafío de educar a los hijos en el innovador contexto multipantallas. FAMEDUC: Una herramienta para una adecuada participación de las familias en la cultura digital* ("The family and the challenge of educating children in the innovative multiscreen context. FAMEDUC: A tool for the adequate participation of families in the digital culture").

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7. Notes

[1] In 2008, which is considered the beginning of the expansion of new media, television consumption reached a new historical high: an average of 227 minutes per person per day, which increased to 234 minutes in 2009, to 244 in 2010, and 262 in 2011. These figures show that Spain is a heavy TV consumer. The progressive implementation of the new model of digital terrestrial television and the rise of different payment platforms show that despite the emergence of new media such as the Internet, television continues to be the star in the audiovisual media landscape in Spanish homes.

[2] The pioneers of this line of research in Spain are Aparici, Callejo, García-Matilla, Núñez-Ladevéze and Pérez-Ornia, and Marta Lazo, whose work is based on the

definition of audience as active and the definition of communication as a reality mediated or established within the framework of interpersonal relations.

[3] In 2011 children consumed more than 3.5 hours of television per day.

[4] Orozco uses the term scripts (*guiones*) to refer to children's mental schemes that stem from their capabilities, history and determining factors. From the moment the child is born it interacts with its environment and adopts socially accepted forms of behaviour. These scripts acquire their meaning in the sphere of signification. The meaning children give to scripts depends on the specific orientation of the involved institutions, as it is the case of the family (Orozco, 1996: 37).

[5] There are studies that corroborate the socialising effectiveness of television fictional series, which are characterised by their great seduction power over children, which leads them to establish an almost real relationship with TV characters (Livingstone).

[6] The innovative concept of pragmatic dissonance is derived from the analysis of the results of a survey designed by Núñez-Ladevéze and Pérez-Ornia and carried out by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS) in 2000 (Study 2.391: *La televisión y los niños: hábitos y comportamientos* ["Television and children: habits and behaviours"]).

[7] In 1995, Callejo published *La Audiencia Activa* ("The Active Audience"), which is a fundamental precedent in television audience studies from the perspective of mediated communication and, therefore, of our work. The empirical rigour of this study separated it from an important essayist tradition in Spain which aims to reinforce many prejudices about television, to start a line of research that sought to better understand the relations between audiences and the screen and to explain them as part of the set of social relations experienced by viewers in their everyday lives. In this work Callejo redefines television as a "social object built by the subjects themselves, based on their perceptions and the updating of these perceptions each time they include television in their practices" (1995: 17). At the end of the book Callejo recommends to revitalise the qualitative perspective as a privileged way to understand audiences as active agents and to recover the study perspectives of the different social classes in the study of television. These recommendations were followed by the research project mentioned in the introduction of this article and are the basis for this article.

[8] The author of this article is in charge of a research project funded by the San Pablo-CEU University, which attempts to answer these questions. The research project

is entitled: *La familia frente al desafío de educar a los hijos en el innovador contexto multipantallas. FAMEDUC: Una herramienta para una adecuada participación de las familias en la cultura digital* (“The family and the challenge of educating children in the innovative multiscreen context. FAMEDUC: A tool for the adequate participation of families in the digital culture”). The research team is composed of 11 researchers and is called FAMEDUC (www.fameduc.es).

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