

## Mind the gap: meeting the media needs of 10-14's

How kids navigate the media landscape and how media producers can make credible and engaging media for early adolescents.

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With pressure mounting in the playground but also increasingly from social networks and gaming spaces, kids are faced with making difficult decisions about themselves, who they think they are and who they want to be. In the midst of an always-on, multiplatform world, forming an identity as an early adolescent is opening up.

So what is adolescence and what's going on in their minds as well as their bodies? Why is forming an identity so important at this age and how can media producers better engage with 10-14s?

Taking a nod from academic research into kid's experiences of media and of games research, Barbie Clarke and David Squire will set challenges and pose questions for media producers aiming their content at this in between age.

What's it really like being an adolescent? How do kids create an identity when stuff comes at them from all directions? How can media better target early adolescents?

## What is early adolescence and what is happening?

### The psychosocial lives of early adolescents

The ages 10-14 are referred to as early adolescence. Children experience physical, cognitive and psychological change, with the onset of puberty a major factor. It is an age of transition in which children develop friendships and explore their identity. The move from primary school to secondary school that most children in the UK experience at eleven is a major transitional stage and psychologists describe the age 11-12 as an in-between age: not quite a child but not yet a teenager. Erikson<sup>1</sup> called the period just before puberty 'the era of industry', a time when social interaction begins to occur outside the home, with teachers and with peers, and when children focus on learning and finding out about many different activities. This is a key age to learn about emotional communication. But one of the tasks of the adolescent is to become independent of parents, to go through a process of individuation; that is the way in which an individual comes to acknowledge their own unique and individual characteristics. The process is a key concept of Jung's beliefs<sup>2</sup>. Understanding children's

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<sup>1</sup> Erikson, E. (1968) Identity Youth and Crisis. Norton. New York.

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C. (1921) Collected Works volume 6. published by Routledge 1992.

ability to recognise, respond to, and express emotion is now seen as an important part of children's learning.

The focus on children's emotional well-being is relatively new. There is now an acceptance that children should actively play a part in decisions that affect them, and since the Children's Act of 2004 the emphasis is less on just the role of parents in children's upbringing, but on the collective caregivers in the wider community. Linked to this is children's increasing use of digital technology which has been cited as a cause for concern by childhood professionals and the media, and associated with general unease about levels of children's well-being. The recent Bailey Review<sup>3</sup> (published June 2011) looked at the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood, and pointed out that parents are not always aware of what their children are doing digitally.

### **Emotional communication between early adolescents and peers**

The ability to form friends appears to have a direct effect on how children cope with crisis, and their levels of well-being. Research has shown that children with an understanding of the emotional needs of others are able to form better and more intimate relationships. Children's horizons grow considerably in early adolescence and friends become more important. Friends can act as a buffer between parents and children, especially at times of conflict or trauma. Barbie's research has shown that early adolescents regard close friendship as a source of comfort and a place where concerns and feelings can be expressed. Children at this age are especially likely to share intimate thoughts and feelings. Several major studies have begun to explore how children form friendships and establish relationships through digital technology, notably the Digital Youth Report from Berkeley<sup>4</sup> and the EU Kids on line research from the LSE<sup>5</sup>. Barbie Clarke's own research<sup>6</sup> looked at the way early adolescents communicated emotionally through digital technology.

### **Adolescents and Identity**

Today's early adolescent is of a generation that has grown up with digital technology, and the notion of instant communication. Such communication allows children to play with their identities; they can 'pretend' to be someone else in very real way; different age, gender, race, class<sup>7</sup>. Emerging identity is an important aspect of early adolescent development. Erikson<sup>8</sup> believed that the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood depended on the establishment of an identity and that the task of the adolescent was to transcend the various roles adopted in childhood, often influenced by

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<sup>3</sup> Letting Children be Children (2011) – Report of an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208078>

<sup>4</sup> The Digital Youth Report <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/>

<sup>5</sup> EU Kids Online <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> Clarke, B. (2009) Early Adolescents' Use of Social Networking Sites. Policy and the Internet. Vol 1. 1 <http://www.psocommons.org/policyandinternet/vol1/iss1/art3/>

<sup>7</sup> See 6 above

<sup>8</sup> Erikson, E. (1980) Identity and the Life Cycle. Norton, New York.

family beliefs and values, and find for themselves a role that reflected their new found interests, beliefs and values that were uniquely their own. Peer group influence and social identity is important to children, especially in Year 7 where alignment to a group can provide a source of support in the time of transition and adjustment that accompanies the move to secondary school. Research has shown that crowd identification is an important way for young people at this stage to define themselves. Boyd, writing in the Digital Youth Report (2006)<sup>9</sup>, aptly describes young people's obsession with social networking sites as a means of defining who they are, a process she describes as 'identity production' which involves them trying to 'write themselves into being'. A necessary skill to learn in adolescence is to negotiate social worlds, confronting difficult situations, and finding out about power play. It can be argued that the use of social networking using digital technology with which early adolescents are so engaged is a superb way to learn these skills.

### **Early adolescence, identity and digital technology**

With the 'open' nature of social networking using digital technology, concern about children's safety remains paramount to commentators and child experts. While there are many positive aspects of children using social networking, dangers undoubtedly exist, and not just the infiltration of online predators, but also cyberbullying and accessing disturbing or inappropriate material. While children are open about their lives, and want to share their worlds, they could potentially be putting themselves at risk, causing them emotional distress. Barbie Clarks's 3 year ethnographic research<sup>10</sup> showed children lying about their age to join Facebook, setting up 2<sup>nd</sup> accounts to hide from their parents, and adopting avatars which were an idealised form of themselves – similar, but often slimmer, braver, more attractive, and more successful. Mostly this was empowering for them and allowed them to do what adolescents have always done – exploring friendship and searching for an individual identity – only they are doing it using different media. In our review of the media needs of 10-14's we are not ignoring the need for adolescents to be vigilant in how they interact digitally, but we see gaps and we see opportunities for media providers.

## **Implications for media providers**

### **Games and social media are increasingly influencing how children form their identity.**

Media has presented young people with role models that inform their identities for donkeys' years. Traditionally (that means, maybe ten years ago?) this was about simple exposure to cultural icons, with the exploration of identification left, literally, to the imagination of the child [think Hollywood glamour, Top of the Pops star].

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<sup>9</sup> The Digital Youth Report <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/>

<sup>10</sup> See 5 above

### **Game-based avatars enable gamers to play at being yourself or someone else.**

Because of the ludic nature of digital games and specifically the game mechanic of 'agency'<sup>11</sup> [player control] gamers can take on a role or persona as a actor, playing out scenarios from a character's perspective [think Carl Johnson in Grand Theft Auto, Zelda's Link, Lara Croft]. Alternatively players project their own persona onto a game's player-character's in-game actions, choices and attitudes [think multiplayer role play games like EVE Online and World of Warcraft as well as virtual worlds epitomised by Second Life] as an avatar.

Game designers like Toby Gard<sup>12</sup> the creator of the iconic Lara Croft character make a distinction between an actor, as a character distinct from the player, with its own personality and characteristics' and an avatar as a 'visual representation of the player's presence'.

In gaming the relationship between the player and player-character is a complex interplay between the player's abilities to manipulate the player-character within the games rules and the game world, and how the player transposes themselves into the game scenario. How does Lara react? How do you react?

### **Playing at being gets increasingly complex in persistent game worlds.**

As game worlds become increasingly complex, open-ended and 'persistent' [think World of Warcraft, Neverwinter Nights] so the skills and attributes of a successful player become multifaceted.

Playing as actor and in particular playing as avatar, offers dynamic ways to explore identity. Gender swapping in player character avatar selection is common<sup>13</sup>. For some players, socialisation online becomes easier than in real life<sup>14</sup>.

### **'Gamification' [ubiquitous gaming] is on the rise.**

'Gamification' (don't you just love new words!) is also predicted<sup>15</sup> to take on a significant role in the lives of Generation D/Gen Z (digitised 14s and younger). Ubiquitous gaming is about playful experiences and turning everyday life into a series of challenges or competition. In a way, it's what we all do from time to time. It's just that, for Gen Z, it's habitual.

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<sup>11</sup> Murray, Janet H. (1997) Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace (MIT Press)

<sup>12</sup> Gard, Toby (2000) Building Character Available at [www.arts.rpi.edu/~ruiz/egdfall07/readings/Building%20Character.doc](http://www.arts.rpi.edu/~ruiz/egdfall07/readings/Building%20Character.doc)

<sup>13</sup> Zaheer Hussain, Mark D. Griffiths. Gender Swapping and Socializing in Cyberspace: An Exploratory Study in CyberPsychology & Behavior. February 2008, 11(1): 47-53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Future Laboratory: Trend Briefing - Ubiquitous Gaming Culture, Spring 2011 <http://www.thefuturelaboratory.com/>

### **Social networks are redefining how kids communicate with peers.**

Social networks enable ‘projection’ [putting on a front]. Young people form and play out personas, pushing forward one aspect of themselves (or what they would like to be) whilst editing out aspects they don’t want others (‘friends’) to see.

On Facebook, you project aspects of your life to a much wider network of friends than face time will allow. Having a bigger audience, that can comment, ‘like’ or flame your posts and pictures, creates a broad canvas on which to form, present and nurture identity.

### **Forming an identity can now be drawn from multiple sources, playfully.**

These new ways of forming and playing out identities (gaming avatars, social networks) extend the scope for young people to play out roles, experimenting with being different – being stronger, braver, slimmer. Being a boy when you’re a girl, being a girl when you’re a boy.

There’s a growing bank of research looking at kids behaviour and attitudes to social networks and online living.<sup>16</sup> This is all relatively new, even for the new media and video gaming industries. Lest we forget, Facebook was only launched in 2004.

### **Mind the gap between children and teens. 10-14s are under served.**

However, there’s a gap in media content and related playful experiences for that falls between tweenagers (8-10s) and fully fledged teenagers (14-19’s) with plenty of media experiences tailored for the tweenager market [Moshi Monsters, Club Penguin, Sarah Jane Adventures, Pokemon, Poptropica].

But, as we’ve heard, 10 year olds are lying about their age and signing up to Facebook, despite its 13+ age rating. 10s and over are migrating to content made for older or adult audiences, whether it’s a social network, a gaming environment or TV production [think Gran Theft Auto, Call of Duty, Skins, Misfits, the Inbetweeners].

There’s a gap between say CBBC content and the 9am UK watershed, or the 10pm drama/comedy slot on Channel 4. There’s little that’s aimed fairly and squarely at 10-14s and their changing life experiences. CBBC’s Service licence covers 6-12s (think Sarah Jane Adventures) and beyond that, its ‘family viewing’ (think Doctor Who). Channel 4’s extension to their public service remit to include children from 10 years old has yet to kick in. The gap appears to be pan-media, spanning TV, social media and gaming.

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<sup>16</sup> EU kids on line LSE <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx> and Digital Youth Research - MacArthur Foundation in US <http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/report>

## **What's to be done?**

How can we mind the gap? The watershed, the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood and the transitory nature of the age group makes compelling, age appropriate and engaging content troublesome to devise and commission. It's without doubt a tough call – which may explain why there's so little media tailored at early adolescents out there.

### **Understand the tension of transition**

Get inside the minds of the audience:

- Adapting to change (from primary to secondary school; physiological)
- Exploring social competences (being different, being the same; fitting in)
- Questioning (parental values; the world around you)
- Toying with identity (Playing with personas, trying out new looks and attitudes)
- Gaining peer influences (gaining credence from peer groups)

Know what they're doing in gaming and in social media. Consider their media habits and the psychology behind it. Consider what's missing.

### **Transmedia**

Threading a narrative across multiple platforms, where 10-14s naturally go. Find interesting ways to move meaningfully between social networks, television sets (read on-demand) and gaming worlds. Maybe a common denominator is gamification? Lest we forget, storytelling remains universal.

[Aside: Transmedia, coined by MIT's Henry Jenkins<sup>17</sup> 'represents the integration of entertainment experiences across a range of different media platforms'. Transmedia is storytelling that 'immerses an audience in a story's universe through a number of dispersed entry points, providing a comprehensive and coordinated experience of a complex story.' The problem is, there are few successful examples to point to. Yet.]

### **Universality**

If you broaden things out and aim for mass appeal, does the power diminish? Soaps and US content have resonance with early adolescents (think Hollyoaks, Friends, The Simpsons). Can we learn anything from the way that The Simpsons present dual audience references (double meanings) or from its anarchic, slapstick humour? Is there any room in representing UK family life from an alternative, playful perspective?

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<sup>17</sup> Jenkins, Henry (2008) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press)

### **Social viewing - dual screening, sofa surfing**

Embrace dual screening and social viewing<sup>18</sup> [opening back channels to express views and opinions; joining the conversation]. How other families and other people live their lives are intriguing to all – comparing yourself and your parents and siblings to others. Perhaps sofa surfing and social viewing is a mediator between parents and young adolescents?

### **Twisting the familiar**

Pick a topic or situation that's relevant to 10-14s . Deal with specifics head-on, but give it a twist. Like the way Channel 4's Misfits<sup>19</sup> handles friendships, sex and social stereotypes in a credible and funny way.

### **Surrealism**

Take a trip and open up a new dimension. Offer an alternative voice. Take a leaf from Angry Birds<sup>20</sup> [firing fluffy birds at green pigs with a catapult] or Mighty Boosh<sup>21</sup> [two misfits run a second hand shop and occasionally burst into song]. Make metaphysical references to transition and metamorphosis.

### **Summing up**

Early adolescence is an exciting time. It sees a child move from the familiar world of Primary School to the challenges of Secondary School. It brings with it huge change and transition, and it sees children beginning to embrace the adult world but making it their own. While it is a developmental stage that can appear challenging, it offers great scope and opportunity for media providers. At this age they do not want to be aligned with younger children, but they are not yet ready (and nor should they be) for the full teenage adult world. They want to explore and experiment, but in a safe and engaging way. Oh and they still, mostly, love their mums and dads.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/social-viewing-part-prime-time-102485>

is a neat summary of social viewing

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.e4.com/misfits/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://shop.angrybirds.com/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.themightyboosh.com/>

## About the authors

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Barbie set up Family Kids and Youth with a small team of expert researchers nine years ago. An international youth researcher for over 25 years, she was formerly Director of the Family division of GfK NOP. She completed her PhD in child and adolescent psychosocial development at the University of Cambridge where her research looked at early adolescents' (10-14 year olds) use of digital media. Barbie is a trained child therapist, LEA Governor of a Primary School, and sits on the BBC Children's Editorial Advisory Board.

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David is founder and Creative Director of DESQ [www.desq.co.uk](http://www.desq.co.uk) a digital content developer with a focus in children and learning. DESQ's portfolio spans 12 years developing digital media for broadcasters, educational publishers, Government agencies and the private sector. David was until Summer 2009 an honorary Research Fellow at the University of Bristol, looking at theories of game design and game-based learning. He is a member of advisory groups for BBC and PACT and is a Fellow of the RSA.