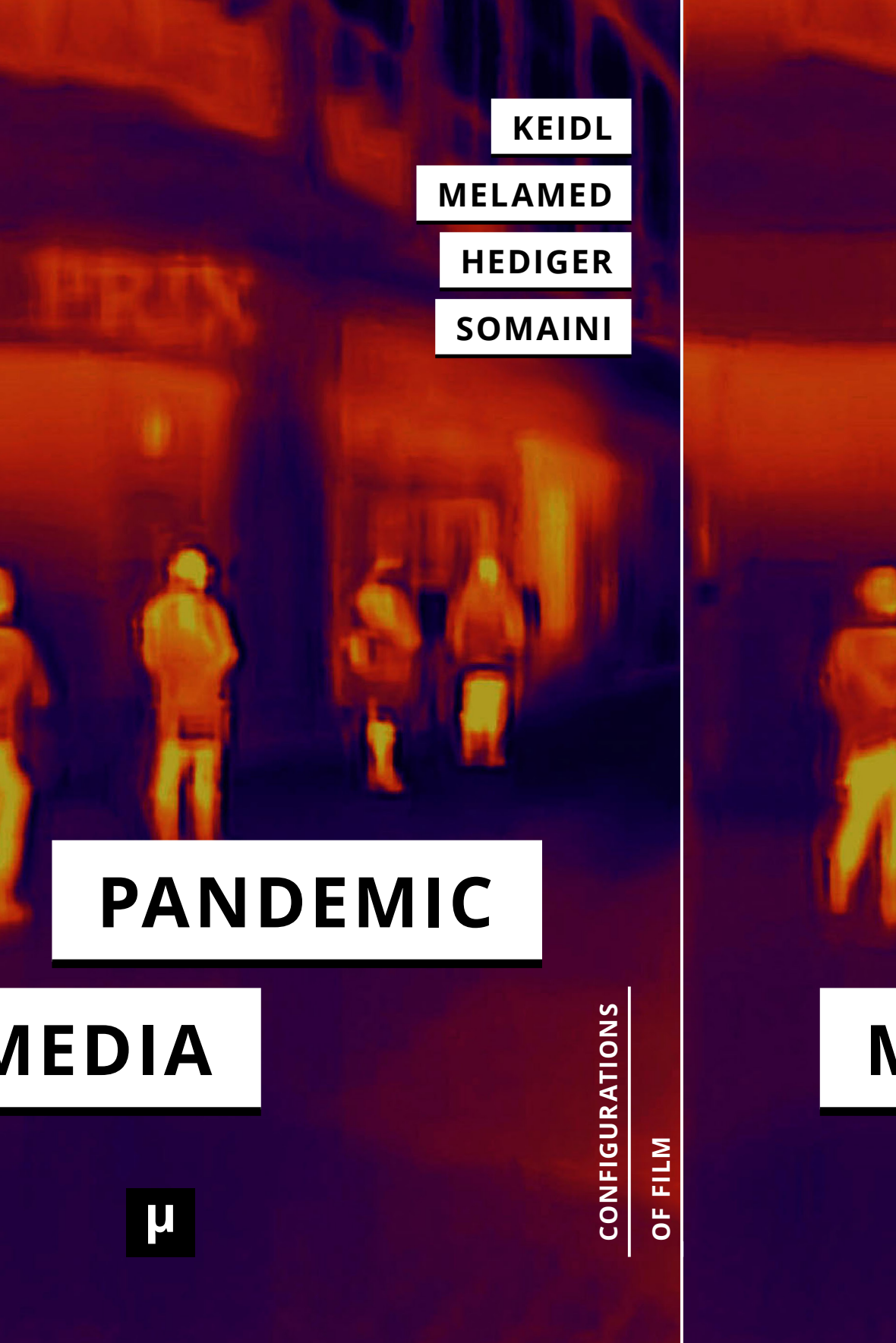

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PANDEMIC MEDIA

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Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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SCREEN TIME

CHILDREN'S MEDIA

EFFECTS STUDIES

STRETCHY TIME

[2 6]

The Time Stretched before Us: Rethinking Young Children's "Screen Time"

Meredith A. Bak

Children's media culture has been dominated by concerns over "media effects" and by a broader preoccupation with how children spend their leisure time. In recent years, a growing expert critique of "screen time" has begun to challenge these dominant perspectives. This critique has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, given the unexpected heightened reliance children have on screen-based media for both educational and recreational purposes. This essay links the media effects tradition with several features of the screen time debate, noting screen time's role in sustaining a future-based orientation of childhood. It proposes the pandemic's changes to domestic life as an opportunity to reconsider children's time and needs in the present, as flexible and occupied by a range of activities, including engagement with screen-based media without the artificial distinction of "screen time," which establishes unnecessary judgments and valuations.

Demanding that parents just watch the clock misses the point of parenting in the digital age.
Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross (2020, 47)

Screen time essentially became time itself.
David Zweig (2020)

On April 6, 2020—only weeks after New York City's lockdown orders were announced, Andrew Przybylski and Pete Etchells published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* titled "Screen Time isn't All that Bad." In the wake of the pandemic, they write, "our families' screen time is about to go through the roof… and that's fine" (Przybylski and Etchells 2020, 27).

Przybylski and Etchells challenge the long-standing dominance of the media effects paradigm: a research tradition advanced in fields from communications to psychology that endeavors to find direct causal links between exposure to media and particular health or behavioral effects in young audiences (Przybylski and Etchells 2020, 27). Since at least the 1990s, researchers have "caution[ed] against the kinds of simplistic, casual connections that are often derived from 'effects studies.' Instead, they advocate a research agenda that pays more attention to the broader social context of how [mediated] images are actually read" (Kinder 1999, 4). The notion of "screen time" is a curious biproduct of the media effects legacy, presupposing that engagement with screen-based media represents a distinct quality and kind of experience that can be measured as such. Przybylski and Etchells's call to critically evaluate (and relax) prohibitive screen time limits thus gestures to a longstanding reconfiguration of children's media discourse that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped to accelerate.

This reconfiguration entails considering young children's screen time—indeed, children's time overall—not as a bounded set of discrete units to be limited and monitored, but as flexible and adapted to the intensity of children's interests and play. Such a shift deemphasizes media effects in favor of recognizing media as one mode (among many) that can foster opportunities for engagement and connection. Interrogating screen time as the core metric by which children's media engagement is judged offers new opportunities, not only to recognize media as a way to foster human connection during this time, but to reveal and unravel ways that time itself has prevented attention on children's everyday lived experiences in the present.

From Futurity to Immediacy

Although contemporary children's media discourses are largely organized around screen time, earlier preoccupations concerning children's interactions with commercial media have principally reflected a concern with *time* overall. The adoption of compulsory schooling and labor reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries subjected children's time to new modes of standardization and rationalization, charging children's leisure time with heightened importance as a resource that can either be squandered or used productively (Bak 2020, 42-49). "Because the activities of daily life provide the knowledge, skills, and behaviors children acquire as they develop," Wartella and Robb write, "it is no wonder that so much of parental concern focuses on how children spend their time" (2008, 7-8). This emphasis on time has long been present, but as the pandemic has shifted the percentage of daily activities that are organized in and around the home, parental concern with children's time (and the amount of children's time to be accounted for) has taken on new significance.

The stakes of how leisure time is spent and of media effects are perceived to be higher for children, given the understanding of childhood—and especially early childhood—as a crucial developmental period. This developmental paradigm has dominated perceptions of childhood since the early twentieth century, a perspective emphasizing children's socialization, that fuels anxieties and moral panics around children's social development (Prout and James 1997, 10–14). The two closely-linked ideas, that children's time is precious and that children are particularly impressionable, form the conditions within which children's media culture has been understood. The principle focus on children as subjects in-the-making (rather than as subjects in their own right) is inextricably linked to classical media effects theory that emphasizes future or long-term impacts over elements of everyday context.

Communication theorist Neil Postman began his widely-cited *The Disappearance of Childhood* by characterizing children as "living messages we send to a time we will not see" (1982, x). Postman argued that modern electronic media such as television were effectively making the idea of childhood vanish, creating the figures of the "'adultified' child and the 'childified' adult" (126). These sentiments reveal a preoccupation with futurity uniquely tied to childhood. At the heart of Postman's influential argument is an underlying perception that media confounds generational differences (and the power dynamics attached to them). The perceived adverse effects of media that result in a "loss" of childlike innocence in Postman's work and similar preceding arguments, such as Greenfield (1973) and Meyrowitz (1986), thus also result in a loss of adult authority when children's autonomy is recognized rather than marginalized (Spigel 1998, 128).

The pandemic's reconfiguration of time and the related changes in adult work patterns, childcare, and education requiring more children to spend more of their time in the home have newly emphasized a focus on necessary choices for children's immediate conditions over their longer, speculative futurities. As the authors of one parenting piece noted: "this pandemic could extend for a long time, so as you create new routines, focus on habits that are sustainable and practical" (Cheng and Wilkinson 2020). The pandemic's indefinite duration, then, throws the tidy, linear arc commonly associated with children's growth and development—a direction associated with progress—into relief. The emphasis has shifted from the future to the present.

The Magic of "Stretchy Time"

The heightened necessity of screen-based media for both formal education and children's leisure time during the pandemic has reconfigured the terms by which parents and caregivers assess the costs and benefits of time with screens. Children's time, like that of adults, has been wrested from its order, and is now subject to new interpretations and valuations. Even before the pandemic, screen time as the dominant analytic wrought "conceptual and methodological mayhem" (Kaye et al. 2020). Among the concept's central problems is the tidy distinction between screen and non-screen time drawn in order to enable a range of judgments.

The perception that screen time constitutes discrete and bounded units of time has been increasingly problematized, especially given the popularization of connected technologies that datify and screenify other everyday practices, such as smart toys and wearables (Mascheroni 2018). Digital media and technologies, write Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross, are "part of the infrastructure of everyday life, rendering time-based, context-free efforts to limit screen time ineffective, with the costs greater than the benefits" (2020, 46). The idea that screen time was an increasingly irrelevant analytic was already gaining traction before the year 2020. In short, Anya Kamenetz writes, "'time' is an increasingly useless shorthand for thinking about digital devices" (Kamenetz 2020). Once an evangelist for measuring and restricting screen time, the pandemic prompted Kamenetz to reevaluate the validity of such a position, and to consider contextual factors such as home and social environment alongside screen time. Like Kamenetz, the COVID-19 pandemic forced countless caregivers worldwide to evaluate screen time debates in new relation to changes in educational and leisure practices, as a means of remote instruction and to occupy especially young children while adults in the household work remotely.

During the pandemic, the divisions that give shape to familiar points of temporal reference—the workday, the weekend, the academic term or

year—have dissolved, giving way to a kind of temporality we might call "pandemic time." Time spent engaged with media is swept up into this formulation, as writer David Zweig lamented, that during the pandemic "screen time essentially became time itself" for his children (Zweig 2020). Hazy, indeterminate, elastic—pandemic time challenges the security associated with imagining children within a clear, future-oriented trajectory, demanding consideration of what is best or necessary for a child *now.*

This imagination of time as more fluid, less fixed, aligns with some models of early childhood education that favor more flexible approaches to structuring children's time: so-called "stretchy time." In contrast to traditional, regimented schedules, when "stretchy time" is implemented "the rhythm of learning [is] governed by engagement rather than the clock" (Cremin, Burnard, and Craft 2006, 115). Stretchy time "prioritise[s] intensity over duration," often asking educators to be more closely engaged in children's endeavors (Sakr and Oscar 2020, 2-3).

Stretchy time is conceptually antithetical to the temporal framework that makes "screen time" an actionable practice. Whereas the implementation of stretchy time enables an activity to expand "'magically'" in response to children's ongoing engagement, screen time is framed by restrictions. In other words, while children's traditional play practices are governed by ideals such as flexibility, "children's digital play experiences are shaped by a popular discourse that children's digital engagement—their 'screen time'—needs to be limited," resulting in "two opposing approaches to time" (Sakr and Oscar 2020, 1). Conceptualizations of "stretchy time" within early childhood discourses retain a valence of urgency associated with the developmental paradigm, by, for instance, tying the benefits of stretchy time to particular outcomes such as enhanced creative thinking. However, the breakdown of traditional, rationalized children's schedules is nevertheless an occasion to prioritize the qualities of elasticity and play associated with stretchiness, thereby reimagining the child as media spectator.

Considering time as elastic, capable of expanding when engagement is intense or meaningful, challenges the rigidity of screen time and the associated judgments that screen-based engagement is of lower quality to "real" social or physical interaction. In an unprecedented historical moment when school, work, and leisure activities move through and across screens more than ever, reconsidering screen time invites a conception of children who use media as and alongside other resources to connect, inquire, explore, and create. Eroding the distinctions that render "screen time" discrete from other forms of time also puts screen-based media back into closer relations with "traditional" media such as books. Media scholar Dean W. Duncan echoes the possibilities associated with such an orientation, arguing that: "It needn't always be a matter of better and worse, still less of right and wrong; the differences

between page and screen are not as important as the very substantial conceptual continuities that bridge both technological and temporal gaps" (Duncan 2015, 3). To reassess screen time is to recast the child media spectator as a dynamic, adaptable, responsible, and resilient figure, whose participation with media drives action and imagination. Stretchy time also invites heightened engagement from adult caregivers, who may observe and facilitate rather than simply set a timer.

Beyond Effects: A New Paradigm for Children's Media

The pernicious logics of media industries have remained intact in the months of COVID-19's initial waves. To challenge "screen time" as a limiting framework is not to acquiesce to the endless flow of streaming video on autoplay (a feature that automatically plays another video when the first is finished) or to get stuck in the ruts of algorithmically-generated recommendations. Recent commentators such as James Bridle have written persuasively of the ways that streaming video on platforms such as YouTube Kids almost seamlessly slides from desired content to bizarre, disturbing, and inappropriate content. Many such videos ascend the rankings through nonsensical strings of keywords and hashtags ("word salad") and are, themselves, algorithmically created, exemplifying "a kind of violence inherent in the combination of digital systems and capitalist incentives" (Bridle 2020). Yet there is considerable middle ground between strictly and artificially-limited screen time and an endless flow of unmonitored imagery.

The long-term effects of the pandemic on today's children are not yet knowable. However, as this essay has argued, the pervasive focus on *effects* should itself be interrogated. The temporal reorientation wrought by the pandemic has not only amplified the already mounting critique of screen time, but has also critically foregrounded the contours of the digital divide more prominently related to the issue. As work like Jacqueline Ryan Vickery's *Worried about the Wrong Things* (2017) has pointed out, the risks associated with young people and new media (secondary school-aged youth in Vickery's study) have more to do with equitable access than with the specters of risk on which traditional effects-based studies focus. Popular commentary examining debates in children's media now acknowledges that parents who can devote significant attention and resources to monitoring screen time possess a "fat honking wad of privilege" (Kamenetz 2020) or regard screen-based engagement in relation to highly racially and socio-economically stratified practices such as private school "pods" (Zweig 2020).

Caregivers and educators have long contended with incommensurate conceptions of children's time—time as a precious resource and as empty space

needing to be filled. Yet the implementation of lockdowns, quarantines, and social distancing practices have reshaped the discussion. The radical disruptions to all facets of everyday life give new occasion to suspend worry or guilt over children keeping up, or falling behind, or achieving an arbitrary balance among leisure and educational activities. The "paradoxical freedom of choicelessness" that McTague (2020) describes in the pandemic's wake need not mean that we accept the heightened role of media in children's lives as a necessary evil. Rather, it initiates a more fundamental reconfiguration of children's temporal rhythms and the value judgments attached to them, providing a chance to acknowledge time's affective value and media's role in shaping it.

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Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

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