Lost Childhood: Who is the Real Culprit?

In his 1982 article in *Newsweek*, Joshua Meyrowitz raises a concern about the blurring boundaries between childhood and adulthood. His major worry, based on personal observation, is that children's speech, clothes, and behaviour increasingly resemble those of adults, and vice versa. Children, he says, are speaking of suicide and are dealing with alcoholism, drug addiction, and abortion. Meyrowitz's issue with adults is narrower and less thorny: they simply change careers and dress in "play clothes". Growing up entails learning the adult social world's secrets, and this process has always been gradual, eventually accelerated by acquiring literacy. Yet, as Meyrowitz argues, this process was upset by the 20th-century introduction of a new medium — television. Adulthood and its dark side were now exposed to children and no longer shrouded in secrecy.

By extension, the subsequent invention of the internet should have been a complete end to childhood. It is certainly true that the great diversity of adult or even harmful online content, which undergoes little censorship, influences children's maturation process (Eichhorn, 2019). The vast majority of parents put blame on the internet for their children growing up too quickly (Woollaston, 2014). Yet, in reality, the direct opposite is happening: children's maturation is generally becoming slower (Eichhorn, 2019; Heubeck, 2019). For instance, the number of teenagers engaging in such adult activities as "having sex, dating, drinking alcohol, working for pay, going places without parents and driving" has significantly dropped (Heubeck, 2019). Moreover, teenagers no longer seem to crave independence from their parents, usually epitomised in getting a driving license, moving out, or getting married. They postpone such duties of adulthood and enjoy their parents' company, developing a special dynamic by living together or keeping constantly in touch on social media.

But is the internet to be blamed for postponing adulthood? The reason, in fact, may lie not in the media, as Meyrowitz believed, but in more global socio-economic trends. Hill and Redding (2021) point out that the late-nineteenth-century youth "achieved the markers of adulthood at ages similar to youth today". They observe that these similarities go together with economic transitions and instabilities of the times. The mid-20th-century post-war economic development, however, saw a substantial rise in jobs that did not even require higher education diplomas. Such security allowed teens of the 1950s to

start their careers and families much earlier. Yet the modern knowledge-based economy requires more education and skills to achieve success. Financial insecurity is also the main reason why the modern young generation delays getting married (Horowitz et al., 2019). Thus, the economy, not the media, appears to be the major driving force behind the slower maturation processes across history.

Such inconsistencies in the perceptions of how media affect the young show that Meyrowitz's views, and many of its precedents, are merely moral panics. Films, radio, and even books were once thought to deeply affect children and disturb their development process (Dorn, 2021). Today, these media are hardly a concern for parents who want their children to grow up at their natural pace. Perhaps it is easier to put blame on technological novelties rather than acknowledge the wider socio-economic trends that lie behind how we live our lives? Children watching television or going online surely do not grow up as quickly as child workers, child abuse survivors, and child soldiers, all victims of the global social and economic issues abundant in the modern world (Bardin, 2005; Mitjans et al., 2018). Scapegoating media does not save childhood, but turns the focus away from the real culprit.

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