

BOOK REVIEW

Childscape, mediascape: Children and media in India, edited by Usha Raman and Sumana Kasturi, Hyderabad, Orient BlackSwan, 2023, 360 pp., ₹1100 / \$13.25 (paperback), ISBN: 978-93-5442-730-5

It is almost a cliché to say that media plays a pivotal role in children's lives despite the diversity of childhoods around the world. Children have been subjects of research in the field of media and communication studies since they constitute a large amount of the population. However, they are considered still developing cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically, and thus perceived to be vulnerable and in need of protection and guidance by their caregivers. The contributing research in the field of children and media has been predominantly based on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD), and able-bodied children from middle-class majorities, despite the efforts of scholars in CAM on internationalization. This can be seen in the composition of the editorial board and the published articles in the *Journal of Children and Media*. In the article "A Room of Our Own:" Farewell Comments on Editing the *Journal of Children and Media*, Professor Dafna Lemish presented an analysis of the geographical distribution of authorship in published journal articles, indicating that 41% originate from the United States, 27% from Northern and Central Europe, 10% from Australia, 9% from the Asia Pacific region, and 5% from Southern Europe.

To reduce the gap in knowledge, scholarly endeavors have sought to integrate cultural nuances and uniqueness into the realm of media and communication research for children. For instance, the book *Transcendent Parenting: Raising Children in the Digital Age* sheds light on the integral role of mobile communication in contemporary transcendent parenting from an Asian perspective. This book shares diverse narratives of Asian parents, illustrating how mobile technology is employed for children's education and safety both at home and beyond. Similarly, *Screen-obsessed: Parenting in the Digital Age* delves into a broad spectrum of studies and offers practical advice on children's digital media use. A particular chapter within this book distinctly underscores the pivotal role of culture in shaping parenting styles. It illustrates how an individual's distinctive cultural background can significantly influence the approach to parenting, a phenomenon often nuanced by the interplay of one's indigenous culture and further modulated through processes of Americanization and acculturation.

The book *Childscape, Mediascape: Children and Media in India*, edited by Usha Raman and Sumana Kasturi, expands upon the foundational discussions and studies surrounding children and digital media, specifically concentrating on India. It provided a much-needed intervention in the field of children and media, both locally and globally. The editors highlighted the isolated position of studies on children and media in India, emphasizing the necessity to integrate these works collaboratively. Hence, this book assembles contributions from authors (researchers, teachers, and media professionals) who have consistently engaged with children and youth across a broad spectrum of topics in India. The children examined in these works come from various locations in India with different religious, cultural, caste, and socioeconomic backgrounds, therefore expanding the boundaries of childhood beyond the normalized, middle-class, innocent childhood that is typically media-rich in WEIRD samples.

Overall, 12 articles are selected for this volume and are divided into five different sections: discourse, representations, interactions, construction, and negotiation. This organization provided readers with a relatively comprehensive overall picture in the beginning and later



zoomed into the more specific, in-depth studies in terms of how children and youth use and negotiate with various media content or platforms in India. The first section, Discourses, provides a comprehensive overview of the history and research in children and media (Chapter One) as well as the public discourse on children and digital media in newspaper coverage (Chapter Two). The second section, Representation, examines the representations of childhoods in the Indian context among various mediums, such as children's books (Chapter Three), video games (Chapter Four), and news (Chapter Five). Then, the third section, Interactions (Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight), provides different views and usages among children's media usage through the eyes of children themselves. The last two sections, Constructions and Negotiations, discuss children's creative practices with media production (Chapters Nine and Ten) and how children from marginalized backgrounds negotiate meanings in the mediascapes (Chapters Eleven and Twelve).

The contributors of the book showed a keen awareness of the diversity of childhoods in India due to factors such as caste, religion, social class, and gender differences, and reflected the title of the book "Childscape" well. The children examined in the book range from urban middle-class families to rural populations and minorities. Some chapters were excellent in expanding the notion of childhood beyond the typical middle-class childhood. For example, Chapter Three, written by Deepa Sreenivas, examined how the publication of *Different Tales*, which focuses on children's stories from marginal cultures and regional languages, helps to challenge and expand the notion of childhood as an innocent period of time. The children's stories within the *Different Tales* project may feature elements of violence, discrimination, or challenges that the main characters confront, diverging from the notion of "innocence." Yet, the main characters are not framed within a victim mode but show agencies to negotiate such situations and forge friendships and happiness. Even when the youth examined are from middle-class backgrounds, the book is excellent in providing a different perspective than the Western middle-class childhood (Chapter Six) and showing a variety of perspectives among children from similar backgrounds (Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine), therefore avoiding essentializing a certain population.

With the growing digital device ownership among children and research understanding of children's digital lives, there has been a shift from adult-centered to child-centered perspectives, with an emphasis on children's agency and voice in more recent research. Shifting from a passive need for protection to active empowerment is crucial in understanding the complexities of childhood in the digital age, yet it is essential to avoid the risk of overly romanticizing the empowered child or confining them within the limited view of being a mere digital native. The selected essays from this book provided a relatively balanced view, giving space for children's perspectives by employing a variety of child-centered methodologies, such as ethnography (Chapters Nine and Twelve), focus groups (Chapter Seven), interviews (Chapters Six, Eight, and Eleven), youth participatory action research (Chapter Ten) in addition to thematic and textual analysis in earlier chapters. Moreover, the book includes chapters that illustrate beautifully how children's creative practices of media are forms of empowerment that can benefit children's development and challenge adult authority and social structure (Chapters Nine and Ten).

In the meantime, adults' perspectives are also not ignored. Certain scholars have been transparent about their view of childhood or protectionist tendencies, which is understandable and inevitable as parents and educators are responsible for protecting and educating younger generations. For example, Archana Kumari (Chapter Eight) had a more protectionist view of children and a negative view of the online world. At the beginning of the chapter, she wrote that "adolescents are so inclined to social media . . . these children are vulnerable to the uncontrolled, unfiltered flow of messages . . ." However, after interviews with adolescents from

both rural and urban backgrounds, she admitted that she had her assumption: "I had assumed that they would express the view that social media is a waste of time and that it has a negative impact on them, but instead I found urban adolescents to be quite vocal in their support of social media," therefore respecting adolescents' voices without giving into the pure romanticism of their agency. The balanced view is also illustrated in Chapter Six, where the author Kamala Mukunda examined how high school students make peace and support school policy on technology ban. Through interviews with students, alumni, and teachers, she argued that the use of smartphones in school interferes with the curriculum and philosophy of education in that school, which is to develop mindfulness and an intimate relationship with the natural world. She made a compelling story that students appreciate such school policy, as the implementation of this policy is based on mutual understanding and dialogue between educators and students situated in a nurturing and supportive school environment. In this sense, protection from adults is not the antithesis of children's and youth's agency but can work together for mutual benefits.

Apart from the general impression of the book as a whole, we find Chapter Twelve, written by Bhatia, extremely interesting. In this chapter, Bhatia explores children's religious identities through ethnographic research in three villages in Gujarat, India, shedding light on how these religious identities manifest in their everyday behaviors and interactions within the community. Bhatia critiques media discourse and narratives for exacerbating religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims through biased representations and techniques, thereby normalizing the values and behavior of particular religious communities. This exposure desensitizes them to media violence and polarization, contributing to apathy and segregation within their own community. Bhatia concludes the chapter by suggesting directions for critical media literacy education, especially in areas where children experience heightened tension and biases towards those of different religious beliefs, aiming to foster interfaith dialogues. We were deeply impressed by the thoughtful and meticulous research conducted by Bhatia on a sensitive topic. This sensitivity arises not only from the national context but also from the age group she focused on in her research. The topic of media's role in children's religious socialization is an important topic to study, yet it is not as common as a research focus in secularized parts of the world. Since religion is one of the main reasons for regional conflict and war, there should be more studies on this topic to examine how we can improve interfaith dialogues among children through interventions like critical media literacy curriculum, though such work will have to be done with lots of care and sensitivity.

While the contributors to this book extend beyond academic researchers, we have noted that certain chapters lack rigor in terms of methodology or theoretical contribution. Integrating these disparate elements into a cohesive whole could be facilitated by a concluding chapter. We hope that future scholars will replicate the study or apply theoretical frameworks to delve into the underlying mechanisms of the findings presented in the chapters. However, imposing limitations on what constitutes knowledge production seems counterintuitive to the purpose and philosophy of this book. The valuable insights provided by media practitioners and educators are instrumental in broadening empirical evidence, particularly in settings that may pose challenges to academic access.


Overall, we find *Childscape Mediascape: Children and Media in India* fun and accessible for both the public audience and academic researchers. It significantly enriches the ongoing dialogue on media literacy education, particularly at a time when confusion, discrimination, and apathy prevail not only in face-to-face interactions but also in the online realm. This book fosters engaging discussions, shedding light on India as a nation where conflicts and discrimination stem from diverse factors such as class, caste, gender, and religion. It underscores the distinctive challenges present in Indian

media cultures compared to those in the Global North. Furthermore, it offers invaluable insights into decentralizing the conventional social imagery of a middle-class childhood, where children are portrayed as inherently tech-savvy and creatively adept in a media-saturated environment that prioritizes innovation and play. As Kamala Mukunda aptly articulated in Chapter Six: “The problem with perceiving things as normal is that their inevitability is never questioned.” This book effectively challenges the status quo by amplifying voices often marginalized in public discourse and academic research.

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