



Media Lives – Wave 7 (2011)

Summary Report

Research Document

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Section 1

Introduction

The Media Lives study was originally set up in early 2005 to provide a small-scale, rich and detailed qualitative complement to Ofcom's quantitative surveys of media literacy. Whereas the surveys seek to quantify, in a statistically robust way, how many and what kind of people have different levels of media access, awareness, skills and understanding, Media Lives aims to put a human face to the data.

This seven-year ethnographic video study has tracked the evolution of people's relationship with digital media – how it fits into their lives, what motivates them to adopt new technology and learn new skills, their usage habits, levels of understanding, issues and concerns about media.

Each participant is interviewed at length and in the home, which allows for a full exploration of the relevant issues and for demonstration/observation of media use *in situ*. Seven waves of research have been conducted, in February 2005, and October 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010. The most recent round of interviews took place between 6th October and 13th November 2011 and were conducted by Mark Ellis, Tony Harbron and Tony Palmer of The Knowledge Agency.

Certain subjects (many of which have been subject to great change over the seven years of the study) have been covered consistently each year, including:

- Acquisition of media (e.g. web) skills, confidence in use of digital media, and adoption of new online activities (e.g. social networking)
- Use of mobile devices to consume content
- Sources of knowledge and information about digital media, and methods of learning new skills
- Trust in media providers across different media
- Concerns about privacy, security and safety

The structure of the research has been sufficiently flexible to allow for more topical issues, or issues of particular interest to Ofcom at the time, to be explored each year. These include (in 2011) issues surrounding privacy and the security of personal data, contextual advertising, and participants' evolving relationship with news. While this is not a substitute for detailed research into these areas, it has allowed Ofcom and its stakeholders to have some indicative insight into these subjects.

The number of participants is relatively small – between 12 and 18 each year – but these people have been chosen carefully to reflect a broad cross-section of the UK population in terms of age, location, ethnicity and social circumstances. The unique methodology has allowed us to pursue extended discussions with these individuals, and to track their progress over time. Five of the fifteen participants in the latest round of interviews have been part of the study since the start, and six more joined the study in 2006. (Section 3, below, highlights the individual journeys over time of a selection of our participants.)

All interviews have been filmed, and the video is the main vehicle for the presentation of findings from the research. Each year's debrief is a 'living documentary' featuring extensive themed montages of participants talking about key issues – more than an hour of video in each presentation.

In addition, the key insights from each individual interview have been clipped and catalogued by theme, platform and participant, for each year of the study. The cumulative databank of nearly 2,000 video clips now represents a uniquely rich and detailed resource for exploring and communicating the evolution of consumer attitudes to digital media and media literacy issues in the UK.

Section 2

Key findings

2.1 Increased confidence in using the internet to conduct daily business

Increase in internet adoption

This year has seen another significant increase both in the penetration of internet use among our sample and in the integration of the internet into participants' daily routines.

All of our participants are now using the internet, at least occasionally. Of the two participants who were most resistant to the idea of using the internet, one (a 50-year-old unemployed man) has been using it regularly in the past year to look for and apply for jobs; the other (a 67-year-old retired woman) has finally – in her own words – ‘succumbed’ to having broadband installed in her house, having been given a computer by her daughter. One further participant (a 78-year-old widow) does not have internet access at home, but does use it in her local library and at her children's homes.

“I’ve been backed into a corner. Every time I phone up, or go to a place, they tell me “Just go to www.something or other...” and it makes me want to scream. All I wanted was a form to fill in.”

F, 67, retired, Edinburgh

Use of the internet as a functional tool

Most participants now claim to be using the internet as an essential daily tool, as well as a source of content and means of communication. This year participants reported much more frequent use of the internet for shopping, finding ‘deals’ through sites like Groupon, job and house-hunting and various forms of online banking – from checking account balances to foreign exchange trading.

“Online banking, I’ve started doing that. I check my balance online every few days... I dread doing it!”

F, 23, trainee doctor, Plymouth

“I shop for almost everything on the internet... I go through Nectar, and then you’ve got all the websites that you need.”

F, 38, housewife, Essex

We have witnessed a shift in attitudes and behaviour in recent waves of the study. Whereas in previous years many participants had described ‘going on the internet’ as an activity in its

own right, they are increasingly likely to describe the internet of a means of conducting activities they might otherwise be doing through other means.

“It’s more instant if you do something online. Last week I had to get a copy of a birth certificate, and they have to ask you a mammoth amount of questions... it was so much easier than having to have someone ask you all the questions on the phone. You could just tick a few boxes, put your £10 payment through, job done.”

F, 45, housing officer, Coventry

To a lesser degree, participants also reported using the internet to engage with government and public services such as NHS Direct. In particular several reported having completed their 2011 Census form online.

Increased interest in, and adoption of, Skype

There was also a significant increase in the reported use of Skype to communicate with friends and family, particularly using its video-calling functionality. Most users were doing so occasionally rather than regularly – often for talking to friends or family abroad, or to call home when away – but nonetheless this occasional use was highly valued.

“We’ve got friends in South Africa, so we speak to them on Skype. I like it... it’s good to talk to people, but it’s nice to see them as well.”

F, 34, fundraising manager, Cardiff

“Skype comes into play at the weekend. My brothers are interested in Forex (foreign exchange trading), so we all go online together – they’re all over the place – and I can share my desktop with them. That web conferencing aspect of it is unique. That comes in handy.”

M, 25, planning assistant, Stevenage

Changing relationship with the postal service

In the light of Ofcom’s new responsibilities for postal services, in this year’s interviews we explored the extent to which use of the internet has changed the relationship participants have with the postal service.

Almost all participants claimed to have replaced some or most of their postal activity with online alternatives, especially in terms of bill-paying and bank statements. Indeed, some of the younger participants struggled to remember when they last sent a letter. Conversely the increased prevalence of online shopping means that most participants are receiving more parcels than before, and several mentioned using the internet to track packages.

"We don't get a lot of post these days... most of our bills are paperless now."

F, 38, housewife, Essex

"I depend on the postal service to get the goods delivered that I order online. One of the good combinations of the post and internet is that you can actually track your post online."

M, 32, web officer, Cardiff

Fear of digital exclusion

The apparent ubiquity of internet use does appear to heighten fear of exclusion for less confident (and especially older) users.

Some participants articulated a view that it is increasingly important for older people to be online, as it gives them access to services that might otherwise be inaccessible, especially if they live in rural areas, and/or do not have support from family close to hand. One participant in particular (a 75-year-old retired woman from rural Buckinghamshire) spoke about this being a key motivating factor in her own (largely successful) attempts to get to grips with the internet.

"That's one of the reasons that I wanted to get on the internet... If you are stuck you can have some means of getting something [delivered], especially food. A lot of people my age don't have anything... they refuse to have a computer... which I find quite disturbing."

F, 75, retired, Bucks

Others expressed some concern that it appears to be more and more common for people and organisations to assume that *everyone* has easy access to the internet. For some this had created practical problems (for example, one woman who signed up to attend the recording of an episode of *Question Time* had been unable to receive the full information about where to go, how to prepare her questions, etc.). Another spoke about being made to feel like a second-class citizen whenever she tells people that she doesn't have an email address.

"This person said to me 'What's your e-mail address... You don't have an e-mail address... You don't have a computer...' It was as if I was dirt."

F, 67, retired, Edinburgh

2.2 Smartphones continue to grow in importance, and encourage greater use of mobile internet

Adoption of smartphones across the sample

Attitudes to mobile phones as a media platform have changed substantially over the seven years of Media Lives. In 2005 the majority of participants viewed their mobile phone as solely, or predominantly, a communication tool. Since 2007, however, there has been a great increase in the use of internet on mobile phones. The high-profile launch of the iPhone, and the wide availability and increased affordability of other connected devices, have fuelled both awareness and interest among our sample.

In Wave 7 (2011), just over half the participants in Media Lives had a smartphone (broadly in line with penetration figures for the population as a whole), and several others claimed that they planned to get one in the next few months. The iPhone and Android devices dominated positive perceptions of smartphones. Our main proponent of Blackberry in previous waves (an 18-year-old woman) claimed to have grown increasingly disenchanted with her device, and to be looking to replace it with an iPhone. (Problems with the Blackberry data service were widely reported at the time of the fieldwork, and this may have contributed to negative perceptions.)

Mobile internet use

The most commonly-cited benefit of smartphones was the ease of access to the internet, which many participants found very appealing. This was felt to facilitate mobile working (e.g. easy access to email on the move), which is becoming an increasingly important facet of the work life of several of our participants.

“My job is going from being office-based to being mobile... We’re going to be getting Blackberries.”

F, 34, fundraising manager, Cardiff

Several participants also reported that much of their social networking is now done via smartphones (especially through Facebook and Twitter apps). Many claimed to be using PCs less as a result, particularly for more ‘routine’ functions such as checking email, Facebook updates, etc.

“That phone alerts me when I’ve got an email, so I do the majority on there. I can’t do that unless I go on the laptop and log in. So it’s much quicker.”

M, 22, delivery man, London

Smartphones have become multi-dimensional personal communications tools for these participants, while the internet-connected PC/laptop plays a more focused role for them,

being used for work, browsing and shopping, and conducting other transactions.

“I love my HTC phone. I do most things on it. I have my music on my phone, my photos on my phone... I just have to press one button and all my emails come up... It’s just so easy... it’s addictive.”

F, 38, housewife, Essex

Most participants described themselves as being more cautious about transacting through their phone than their PC, although they struggled to articulate distinct reasons as to why this was the case. In particular, several described themselves browsing for goods on their phone, but buying them on their PC. On reflection, many concluded that this caution was a function of less familiarity with transacting through their phone, and that they would most likely become more confident over time, as they had with the internet in general.

“I’ve never actually bought anything through my iPhone, but I would do that as a matter of course on my laptop. If you think about it there seems to be very little difference... But I don’t know, it just feels different putting your credit card details into your laptop as opposed to tapping them into your phone.”

M, 28, banker, London

Interest in apps

In spite of the continued growth in reported use of mobile internet across our sample, the appetite to try out new apps seems to have diminished somewhat since 2010. After a period of experimentation most now claim to use just a few apps on a regular basis (although they may have many lying dormant on their phones).

“I think I’ve got about 120 apps on there... I use about four of them.”

M, 37, engineer, Derbyshire

Social networking, banking and shopping/voucher apps were the most commonly used across the sample, although there were also examples of participants being highly reliant on specialist or professional apps, e.g. for tracking share prices or accessing medical information.

“There’s an app for Ebay, an app for Twitter, an app for Facebook. The apps are just easier, so I use those for speed.”

F, 34, fundraising manager, Cardiff

“It tends to be tools that allow me to do the things I need to do... trading applications, charting software, an application that gives me a live feed of precious metals prices.”

M, 25, planning assistant, Stevenage

Mixed feelings about the social impact of smartphones

It is worth noting that feelings towards the impact of smartphones were not always positive, and some participants expressed mixed feelings about the all-pervasive reach of the internet. Some complained about work encroaching increasingly on their home life (e.g. receiving late-night emails on their phone), and others commented on what they saw as the negative impact of mobile devices on the social skills/etiquette of young people, including their own children (e.g. feeling the need to respond to text messages at the dinner table).

“It’s like we’re creating a society where [kids] aren’t going to be able to converse with people, because they’re too busy texting or Facebooking. They’re going to forget the art of speaking to people.”

F, 45, housing officer, Coventry

Concerns about children and smartphones

For the first time in 2011 participants have described younger teenagers and children beginning to have access to smartphones. In some cases, this is because children have saved up their own money to buy these devices; in others, they are becoming available within the family unit as parents upgrade their own smartphones for the first time. Either way, it was clear from this year’s interviews that smartphones have become a real status symbol for the children of some of our participants.

However, parents raised a number of concerns about the prospect of their children having their own smartphones:

- The cost of buying and running smartphones, especially within the context of confusion about mobile data costs (see below).

“[Daughter] has just bought herself a Blackberry... it cost just under £200... she saved and she saved and she saved... This was the first time that I saw about how important status is to them – what sort of mobile you carry about with you says a lot about you, especially to the younger generation... it’s an accessory that none of them can do without.”

F, 45, housing officer, Coventry

- The amount of time children spend online: this is already a concern for some parents, who say they are finding it increasingly difficult to control their children’s access to the internet in their bedrooms via WiFi laptops, games consoles, etc; adding mobile access to

the internet was felt to compound this problem.

“He [son] wants this [HTC phone]... ‘When you get your new one, can I have that?’. And I’m thinking ‘Mmm, maybe not.’ He doesn’t want to get off that [internet on the PC], can you imagine what it would be like if he had it on a phone?”

F, 38, housewife, Essex

- Children’s vulnerability to crime (e.g. mugging).

“I say to mine, when they go out, to carry two mobile phones... They each still have a really old mobile... Keep your Blackberry shut in your bag or in an inside pocket. That way, if someone stops you and says ‘give us your phone’, they’d be too thick to know that you’re carrying two.”

F, 45, housing officer, Coventry

- Concerns about children spending more time than they already do interacting with electronic devices rather than human beings, and the impact this may have in the long term on their social skills.

“We went through a phase when he was obsessed with picking up the phone and playing games on it, and that’s something I’m trying to limit. These habits develop and they become you as a person when you grow up. This is the kind of thing you see now.”

M, 25, planning assistant, Stevenage

Confusion about mobile data allowances and associated costs

Participants’ understanding of the mobile data allowances attached to their smartphones was very limited, as, for many, was their understanding of the distinction between WiFi and mobile data access within the same device. This has already led to some participants experiencing unpleasant surprises when receiving their mobile phone bill, and fears that this will be the case more often in the future, especially if and when their children (where relevant) have access to data-connected smartphones.

This is an inherently difficult area for many, as there is no obvious reference point for them to measure or calculate their data usage. Whereas in principle most can understand how many minutes they might speak for, or how many texts they might send, few have any strong sense of how many megabytes of data they might upload or download.

2.3 Greater confidence in online security and fewer concerns about personal data than in previous years

Fears around online security have eased

As they have become more experienced in browsing, communicating and transacting online, most participants' fears around online security have eased. Indeed, fears about online security rarely came up as spontaneous concerns in this year's interviews, so the attitudes articulated below were largely in response to specific questioning in this area.

Several factors have contributed to this more relaxed stance.

More and more positive experiences online have bred greater confidence: because most participants have now conducted many transactions online without any negative repercussions (so far), they assume that they are safe, and have greater confidence in conducting further transactions online.

Most expect that if (for example) their bank details were to be misused, their bank would cover any losses sustained: some participants have had problems with online fraud in the past; most at least know someone who has experienced this. In all cases it appears that banks and credit card companies have covered the losses incurred, and the expectation is that this would again be the case should the worst happen in future.

Many feel reassured by special security measures: participants commented on what they perceive as increased security measures that have been put in place by the banks, especially around online banking (e.g. pin numbers/machines, additional passwords). These appear to offer an added form of reassurance to some, as well as a symbol of the seriousness with which banks are perceived as treating customers' security.

"All being well the sites are well protected. I think they are. They ones we've used, we've never had any trouble."

M, 50, unemployed, Belfast

"I wouldn't say I was reasonably happy, I'd say I was more than happy, because it's a secure network site... In previous years I perhaps didn't properly understand how it works... Anyway, you've only got to write a cheque and someone's got your bank account details, so it's no different really."

F, 45, housing officer, Coventry

Critical judgement relating to online transactions

Some participants described specific strategies they have adopted which are evidence of them exercising a certain amount of critical judgement in how they choose to transact online. These varied by individual, but included choosing to deal with major institutions in preference to smaller 'brands', making a value judgement as to the security of a site based on its *aesthetics* (i.e. if it doesn't look 'professional', they will not trust it), and limiting their exposure by using a restricted range of accounts (e.g. Paypal, Facebook IDs) to access multiple services.

"You would think EasyJet is fine, National Rail is fine... websites from reputable companies, not dodgy ones you've never heard of."

F, 23, trainee doctor, Plymouth

"If I think the website looks dodgy, I won't use it."

F, 34, fundraising manager, Cardiff

"[For] most of the websites I use, I go through Paypal, which I prefer to putting my card details into a site. That's something I look for."

F, 38, housewife, Essex

Evolving attitudes to sharing personal data

In terms of sharing their personal data with websites they visit, most participants also claimed to be more confident in deciding which data to share, and more relaxed about providing that data, than in earlier rounds of research. Most were happy to provide their name and email address where required, but were more questioning of the need for sites to ask for other details such as phone numbers and dates of birth as a matter of course.

Those who were active on social networking sites considered themselves well-informed about privacy issues, and were largely confident in the privacy settings they had chosen for their accounts. Nevertheless, there were some concerns about reports that Facebook might be planning to change users' privacy settings without their knowledge, or otherwise reveal previously private data through the new 'timeline' feature.

"Facebook changed their settings over the summer. A lot of people's walls became public without them knowing, which is a bit dodgy. And there's been a lot in the news about the fact that they're going to launch this timeline which means that people can see if you de-friend them... I think that's ridiculous."

F, 23, trainee doctor, Plymouth

In practice, however, participants' privacy concerns most commonly manifested themselves in relation to direct marketing, rather than safety or security issues. Many were concerned

about how their information might be used as a marketing tool, and spontaneously mentioned their irritation with unsolicited promotional calls and emails.

“I do get a bit fed up when you buy something from someone like Chemists Direct, once, and they just keep on sending e-mails.”

F, 75, retired, Bucks

With the increased use of smartphones to access email wherever participants go, and with push services providing email alerts at all times of day and night, ‘junk’ email can be seen as particularly intrusive and annoying.

“You get them at all stupid times. And obviously with the phone, when you get an email it pings to tell me. In the middle of the night you get an email... you think it could be something urgent to do with work, and it’s Village Hotels... straight away ‘delete’.”

M, 37, engineer, Derbyshire

As a result of these concerns, many participants claimed to have adopted some kind of ‘coping strategy’ to limit their exposure to digital marketing. Most say they provide the bare minimum data required, and opt to restrict the sharing of their data for marketing purposes, wherever possible. Others have developed more sophisticated strategies, such as supplying false email addresses or inaccurate dates of birth where these are asked for. One participant described having set up a GoogleMail account specifically to use when shopping online, checking into hotels etc., so that his personal and work email accounts are protected from unsolicited marketing messages.

“Whenever I go away with work and check into a hotel, they ask for your email address. You know you’re going to get bombarded with emails so I give them my email address, just not 100% correct.”

M, 37, engineer, Derbyshire

Contextual advertising

Prompted attitudes to contextual advertising (messages targeted in relation to previous web browsing behaviour) were more ambivalent. Most, but not all, participants were aware that such advertising exists, although most claimed to pay online advertising in general very little attention.

“Most of the time I just ignore them... I’m not there for adverts... so most of the time they don’t even bother me.”

M, 50, unemployed, Belfast

When prompted, some participants found the principle of their web browsing behaviour being ‘monitored’ in this way disconcerting, but on balance the majority were reasonably

comfortable with advertising being targeted to them in this way (a small number of participants were aware that it is possible to block such advertising, but had chosen not to do so). Indeed, several participants described contextual advertising more positively as a form of personalised content which might at times be useful.

“You see things that you were looking at last week popping up again. It’s a little bit eerie, even if you know that it’s technology that’s out there... [you think] ‘Aah you again, I was thinking about buying you last week!’”

M, 28, banker, London

“Some people might find it an invasion of privacy... if so you can opt out, but I chose not to. In a way I just see it as another form of personalised content, like a news feed.”

M, 32, web officer, Cardiff

Terms and conditions

Participants were also asked about their attitudes to terms and conditions and privacy policies on web sites. Although most claimed that they are careful to check or uncheck the relevant boxes to ensure that their data are not used for marketing purposes, they also claimed (in the majority of cases) not to read terms and conditions documents before agreeing to them.

They claimed that such documents are too long, and filled with obscure language – they just don’t have the time or the patience to go through them. (Indeed, several suggested that terms and conditions are made deliberately opaque to discourage scrutiny.)

“I’ve done it once or twice, but when you get to page 16 of 72 – and maybe that’s why they do it – you think ‘life’s too short!’”

F, 34, fundraising manager, Cardiff

Having often invested considerable time and effort in getting to the stage in a transaction at which the terms and conditions appear, they don’t want this to be wasted, so they rarely choose to back out of a transaction at the terms and conditions stage. Some felt that this was probably a naive approach to have (and were slightly embarrassed to admit it), although others rationalised their behaviour as a kind of ‘calculated gamble’ based on having already made a decision to trust the organisation they are dealing with (and thus, by extension, trusting the organisation not to have unreasonable terms or conditions buried within the body of a document).

“You make an assumption, given the site that you’re visiting, that they’ll use your data in a certain way. You rely on the integrity of that company and what they stand for.”

M, 28, banker, London

Several participants spontaneously suggested that they would welcome (and read) a summary of terms and conditions, or FAQ-style links to key sections, if these were available.

2.4 Changing relationships with news

Impact of ‘ambient’ news

Over the past three years of the study we have observed the increased importance of ‘ambient’ news consumption as an alternative and/or complement to more traditional news sources. The ubiquity of major headline news in participants’ daily routine – including hourly radio bulletins, video screens at work and in public places, news feeds on their ISP home pages, and even the presence of newspapers at supermarket check-outs – means that most claim to feel well informed most of the time about major headline news, with the option to dig deeper into stories of particular importance or interest to them via news websites, 24-hour news channels or other sources.

“I’ve got the news on here [smartphone] now. So I just have to press a button for UK news, and another one for world news.”

F, 38, housewife, Essex

“When I go on my mum’s laptop, her home page is MSN... which has news headlines... If I see something interesting on there I can click on it, but otherwise I wouldn’t look into anything [to do with the news] that much.”

M, 22, delivery man, London

Many describe themselves as scanning headlines on a regular basis, then dipping in for more detail on an interesting major story (for example, during the fieldwork period, the death of Colonel Gaddafi). A varied combination of platforms might be used to do this, as relevant to the lifestyle of each individual. For example, one participant described himself listening to the news headlines on the radio in the car on the way to work, then looking for more detail on the BBC website once at work; another described herself looking at the headlines online on her ISP’s homepage, then switching on Sky News on the TV for more detail on major stories that interested her.

Decline in perceived importance of main TV news bulletins

As a result of the more widespread availability of headline news, most participants claimed to place less emphasis on traditional news bulletin formats (e.g. the *Six O’Clock News* on TV) than in the past, as more and more of their news consumption is accessed on demand. This doesn’t necessarily mean that they *never* watch news bulletins, but they claimed to be much less likely to make an *appointment to view* these bulletins than they once were.

“If it’s on I’ll watch it, but I won’t go out of my way to watch the Ten O’Clock News, or the Channel Four News at 7.00... because it’s just going to be a repeat of what’s already been published on the internet.”

M, 25, planning assistant, Stevenage

However, regional television and local radio news bulletins were still valued by many participants and are considered to be particularly important by some in an era when local press is seen to be in decline. There were also examples (e.g. in Wales) of a strong online local news source being highly valued.

“I like the local news, that’s more important to me... I follow the Midland news.”

F, 78, retired, Coventry

Range of editorial sources

Although participants described themselves as using a wide range of *access points* to consume news, paradoxically, most described themselves using a limited range of editorial *sources* to inform themselves.

There was less perceived differentiation between the main sources of broadcast news (e.g. BBC vs ITV, Sky, Channel 4) than in previous years. This may be a function of these broadcast news brands being somehow perceived as less relevant or dominant in a multiplatform environment. It may also be a function of a certain level of cynicism towards news media in general, which has become increasingly evident over the seven years of the Media Lives study, and further heightened by the recent phone hacking controversy.

“I just take a bit from all of them... they all say more or less the same thing anyway.”

F, 50, catering worker, London

The BBC was still seen by most participants as the main reference point for detailed, accurate and impartial news content, especially online. Most, if not all, participants claimed to have the BBC in their daily news repertoire somewhere, often alongside another more opinionated alternative (e.g. the *Sun*, *Daily Mail*, *Telegraph*). Some participants claimed to be experimenting with overseas news channels to access fresh perspectives. (Both Al Jazeera and Russia Today were cited as examples.)

“I buy The Sun every day, which is as up to date as The Sun is... then if I want to get some proper detail I just go on the BBC website.”

M, 37, engineer, Derbyshire

“BBC is pretty much my only source, but then sometimes as a kind of guilty pleasure, the Daily Mail... They’re obsessed with Kate and Pippa Middleton and so am I, a little bit.”

There's a pointless story about them every day, but I like to read them."

F, 23, trainee doctor, Plymouth

Most participants claimed to have limited interest in checking a range of sources for a balanced view on major news stories, other than in exceptional cases (usually where the story has a direct personal relevance, for example the recent 'rogue trader' story, which was devoured with interest by one of our participants who works as a banker in the City). Some men described themselves as seeking out a range of alternative views on sports events that were of particular interest to them, especially football matches. However, they claimed not to be seeking a balanced view, but rather a range of opinionated views to stimulate their own thoughts and discussion, and to slake their thirst for coverage and discussion of their favourite sport.

"I find it interesting to find different people's opinions on something I've seen, so if there's been a particularly good game, or something else that I'm interested in, I'll read the write-up in two or three different places, as well as having my own opinion."

M, 28, banker, London

Increased personalisation of news consumption

A smaller number of more advanced Web users claimed to be enjoying far more personalisation of, and interactivity with, news sources.

On one level this involved the personalisation of access points such as the BBC home page or iGoogle to give more relevant and interesting content (or indeed searching for news reports on stories of interest using Google). Another manifestation was examples of news stories being made more personal and meaningful by direct (online) contact with those involved, facilitated by social media. One example of this was the recent riots in London; several participants described themselves communicating via Facebook with friends and family who were directly affected by events.

"That [the riots] became personal because one of my friends lives in London and I was talking to him through Facebook. He was scared for himself and his missus because the rioters were literally on his doorstep."

F, 38, housewife, Essex

Lastly, we have started to see interesting evidence of Twitter being used as a specialist news filter in this wave of research. Only a small proportion of our small research sample are currently claiming to act in this way, so we need to be careful about reading too much into this particular finding at this stage. However, if replicated on a larger scale, this could have far-reaching consequences for news consumption in the future.

These individuals describe themselves as following a mix of mainstream news brands,

individual journalists, and friends and colleagues, all of whom might post information in their own right and/or link to a range of third-party sources that the individuals would be unlikely to find on their own.

“I’m using more social media to follow news stories. Sometimes you’ll find links through to websites you didn’t know existed... That’s usually through friends or colleagues that I’m following instead of organisations like BBC or Guardian who will push their own coverage.”
M, 32, web officer, Cardiff

Within this environment we are seeing the emergence of individuals as authoritative sources, either within their own peer groups or as specialists in specific areas, and with (potentially) just as much authority as ‘traditional’ news brands. Indeed, some journalists were described as becoming ‘news brands’ in their own right, independent of their association with the broadcaster or newspaper for whom they work.

“People on Twitter with a lot of followers tend to assume a lot of authority within than medium. I’d say that brands still have a certain authority whatever platform they’re on, but it’s a different kind of authority I suppose.”
M, 32, web officer, Cardiff

Section 3

Case studies

Since Media Lives began in early 2005, the media landscape has changed substantially. In particular, the growth of the internet, related activities such as social networking and, most recently, major advances in internet access through mobile devices have had a dramatic impact on many participants' daily life.

Nevertheless, over the seven years of Media Lives it has been comparatively rare for the availability of a new technology or service *in itself* to persuade participants to change their behaviour. Most often it is changes in their own personal circumstances that serve as the catalyst to the acquisition of new hardware and/or the development of new skills.

For example, changing domestic or work circumstances mean that participants have changed access to media platforms, are confronted by new media literacy challenges, or just find that different media become more relevant to their needs. For example, one of our youngest participants has started work as a delivery driver in the past year, so is now listening to the radio for extended periods, having barely done so previously.

People also grow into or out of certain activities. Some participants who as students had plenty of time on their hands to play online games, or use social networking sites for lengthy periods, suddenly find that they need to be much more focused in their online activities once they join the world of work.

There follows a selection of short case studies introducing some of the participants in the study¹, and illustrating the impact both of new media technology and lifestyle events upon media adoption and use.

¹ Names have been changed to respect respondent confidentiality.

3.1 Tracey

The digitally emancipated

Tracey is a 38-year-old housewife and mother of two who lives on a farm in Essex. She has participated in Media Lives since 2005, and her 'digital journey' has been a particularly interesting one.

At the outset, she was very unconfident in her use of media technology, and particularly the internet. Her husband took responsibility for all decisions in this area, and was the primary user and 'gatekeeper' for internet use in the house.

"My husband will sit there and talk to me about 'cookies', and I've no idea what he's going on about... On the Outlook Express I've got a Hotmail, or something like that, and I don't know how to get on that... It's confidence; if I had more confidence I think I'd be OK."

(2005)

Tracey herself had very little knowledge or experience in either using the internet herself, or in putting in place safeguards to protect her young children from accessing unsuitable content online. At one point, Tracey's sons had inadvertently accessed porn on the internet, which she had found deeply upsetting, not least because of the sense of failure she felt for her lack of ability to protect them.

"I didn't know that by clicking on a website you'd leave yourself wide open to anything like that... As a parent you want your children to be on the computer... that's what they're learning at school. I don't want my children to be any different to their friends."

(2005)

A divorce in 2006 forced Tracey to take responsibility for her own decisions, including those relating to media, and to find ways of looking after herself and her children in the digital space. Acknowledging that it was necessary for her children to be online to support their school work, Tracey quickly got to grips with the internet, putting in place the necessary steps to protect herself and her family online. She remains vigilant about such issues, and has not encountered any major problems since 2005.

Moreover, in embracing the internet, Tracey discovered that it provided opportunities to engage with life beyond her immediate family in new and exciting ways. By 2007 she had experimented with online shopping, and had joined an online dating site. She had also encouraged her mother to get online, and was supporting her to do so (one of many examples in our sample of internet users providing informal support to family and friends with less knowledge or experience than themselves).

“I’ve got a new email address, I’ve got a new EBay account and I’m also on MSN, which I wasn’t on before... and a dating agency... I think it’s having the belief to do it, and it’s more or less common sense anyway.”

(2007)

Over the subsequent years of the study Tracey has enthusiastically adopted new online activities and technologies. She became an avid internet shopper, a user of Facebook and Farmville, among other things, and has strongly embraced the mobile internet. She was one of the first participants in the study to have a smartphone, and this has now become her principal means of accessing the internet.

“That phone has changed the way I do everything... As soon as I get an alert, or if someone ‘pokes’ me, it will come straight on to my phone... I’m addicted to ‘just checking my messages again’ or ‘just checking my bank again’, because it’s just so easy.”

(2011)

Increased confidence in her use of digital media has mirrored increased confidence and independence in Tracey’s life in general. She has now remarried, but she is now the principal decision-maker in the household for media-related issues.

“I think because I lived on my own for three years, and because I’m older than him [her husband], I say ‘I’m older than you, I’m the boss’... As long as I’m happy, he doesn’t care.”

(2009)

As her children have grown up (now teenagers), Tracey has had to play an increasingly active role in mediating their access to digital media. The issues she now faces have less to do with the nature of the *content* her sons are accessing and more to do with the amount of *time* they spend online (especially playing games). She is also concerned about her children revealing private information online.

“We’ve had to break [older son] down in certain places in terms of not giving out information, and not saying certain things online... Since I’ve had control of it, nothing’s happened.”

(2009)

“There’s literally nowhere else to put it [PC], so he [younger son] has to have it in his own room. He has to have the door open, otherwise we won’t let him on it. Recently we’ve had to keep an eye on how long he spends on there, otherwise he would spend all day on it and you wouldn’t even see him.”

(2011)

Tracey now home-educates her eldest son (who has learning difficulties); digital media, and especially the internet, play a fundamental role in this.

“His Home Education officer wasn’t interested in all the workbooks we had been going through together... He was only interested in what he’s been doing on that [PC]... He’s at the age now that he’s doing what he’s going to be doing when he leaves school... He’s learning his English on the computer, his maths on the computer.”

(2009)

Tracey’s story vividly demonstrates how disempowering lack of media literacy skills can be, but how empowering it can be to acquire them. It also underlines how life events and circumstances can provide the impetus for the development of internet skills.

3.2 Clive

The assured media conqueror

Clive is 28 years old, and lives in a shared house in London with one house-mate. He works as a banker in the City, and has been part of the Media Lives study since 2005.

Much has changed for Clive over the seven years of the study. When we first met him, he was a student living in halls. In year two, he was living back home with his parents, having just graduated and taken his first job in London. Now he has his own (shared) house.

Over that time, he has gone from being a voracious consumer of new media content and an early adopter of new technologies (despite living on a student budget) to being a cash-rich, time-poor young professional. His home is full of the latest technology – flat-screen TV, DAB radio, Playstation 3, etc. – but Clive spends limited time using it.

His internet use in particular has become progressively more serious and focused as the study has evolved. As a student, he was happy “wasting time playing mindless games”, but quickly recognised after graduation that he would not be able to spare the time to carry on doing so.

“I used to go on websites that would just occupy your time, like random games that were simple in format but totally addictive... It was an enjoyable way to use the internet, but not the most productive... Less time means that when you do have the opportunity to use it, you use it for more productive things.”

(2007)

Clive was an early and active adopter of Facebook with a list of over 500 friends. After leaving university, social networking became an important and valued means of keeping in touch with university contacts.

“It has been good as a way to keep in touch with those friends from Uni who you’d like to keep in touch with, but you wouldn’t necessarily have their number, or call them to have a drink or to have a chat with... a group of people you would otherwise completely lose contact with.”

(2007)

However, as time has evolved, Clive’s attitude towards Facebook (in line with many of our participants) has become more ambivalent. Now he considers himself a “weekend Facebook user” only, and is critical of the way in which he considers that some people use Facebook either to broadcast the uninteresting minutiae of their lives and/or to ‘show off’ about how popular they are. As a less frequent user, with limited time available, Clive is somewhat resentful of the volume of ‘clutter’ he has to wade through to get to information that is actually of interest to him on Facebook.

“I’ve definitely got less time for it now. It was a bit of a fad, and a bit of a popularity contest, and you wanted to show that you were doing different things. I think as I’ve got older my whole take on it has changed... I don’t feel the need to publish my life on a forum for people to see.”

(2009)

In parallel, Clive has become less adventurous over time in his use of other online services (music buying, shopping for clothes, etc.), tending to gravitate towards established brands for convenience and confidence, whereas in earlier waves of research he was more open to using more obscure sources to find a bargain, or more unique products or content.

“I’ll be looking at sites that are the sister sites of physical publications, things like the Guardian or the Times, BBC News or Sky Sports News... A lot of it is information-based.”

(2009)

Clive is intellectually engaged by media literacy issues, and has carefully considered views even on issues that don’t directly affect him. In 2006 he spoke of the apparent agenda of much media coverage, driven by political and business interests. He is one of the few participants in the study who choose to compare a range of sources, wherever possible, and will go to some effort to find independent voices either in print or online. However, as his life is increasingly busy, he feels that he has less and less time to do this, concentrating his efforts on stories that directly affect him, such as recent events in the City, or the London riots.

Although not yet an active user, Clive has started to use Twitter, and is interested in its potential as a focused, filtered news source, providing him with access to a range of sources through a simple and pithy interface.

“I think it certainly has a role to play in getting information... from people who you might think have got something to offer... It’s interesting... during the London riots one journalist was saying that he was getting more up-to-date information from Twitter than he was getting from his bona fide news sources.”

(2011)

3.3 Karen

The digital mum

Karen is a 34-year-old charity fundraising manager who lives with her husband and 18-month-old daughter in a house in Cardiff. She has participated in Media Lives since 2006.

Karen has a relatively sophisticated knowledge of digital media. She used to work for a telecoms company, and has access through Virgin Media to digital television, home phone and broadband. She was one of the first participants in the study to use the internet on her mobile phone, and is a good example of a ‘family technician’ (her words) providing help on programming videos, getting online, using mobiles and so on to her extended family group of about 20 people.

“I’m the family technician... I’m still running round the family tuning in TVs, working out Sky boxes... We muddle through it together. People do call on me more than I call on them.”

(2007)

For the first four years of the study, Karen and her husband were an active young couple without children, enjoying digital media as a source of entertainment in its own right, and as a facilitator to their busy work and social life. For example, they enjoyed competing with one another on the various games consoles they owned and regularly upgraded.

“We bought a Nintendo DS and [husband] and I have been trying to outdo each other on the Brain Training. His brain is clearly older than mine. At the end of the day it’s just a kid’s toy, but it’s a lot of fun.”

(2007)

When she became a mother in 2009, Karen’s life changed dramatically, not least in her use of digital media. Whereas mobile technology was previously important to her busy, ‘out and about’ lifestyle, digital technology in the home started to become more important to her, especially during her maternity leave. Emails and social networking became her ‘lifeline’ to her friends, as well as a means of keeping her extended family abreast of the latest developments in her daughter’s life; on-demand and time-shifted viewing was the only way for her to make sure that she could watch her favourite programmes; and her Nintendo Wii, which was once brought out for party games, was used with a Wii-Fit board in an attempt to

shed weight gained during the pregnancy.

“I keep on top of my emails because that’s how most of my friends from work and stuff keep in touch with me now... And forums like Mumsnet, you can post a question and get helpful information... they are really useful.”

(2009)

“The TV package we have has catch-up TV, so I can watch certain programmes whenever she’s asleep [baby daughter]... I’m likely to be catching up on EastEnders at 2.00 in the morning!”

(2009)

Now that she is back at work, Karen’s relationship with digital media has changed again. Mobile technology is becoming more important again for her, not least because her job will change from being office-based to mobile working in early 2012. Mobile internet will be vital to facilitating this (she now has an iPhone as well as a Blackberry), and social media has also become an important tool in promoting her work as a fundraiser.

Conversely, Karen is now less likely to use social networking to keep in contact with personal friends, as she prizes direct contact with them, either face-to-face or by phone.

“More Facebook, not personally, but for work – updating it with events, thanking supporters, and so on. We also Tweet a lot for work, and I’m on LinkedIn as well. Because I’m on there all the time for work, I get a bit bored with doing it personally.... I’m what you might call a ‘basic’ Facebook user. I find there are other things that I do now... When I was on maternity leave it was great, because they were all at work and I could talk to them in work, but now I’d rather go and see them.”

(2011)

However, keeping family and friends who live outside the local area abreast of development in her life remains a priority, and the video-conferencing aspects of Skype have become important to her in this respect.

“It’s how Nana and Grampy [husband’s parents] and [daughter] get to see each other. It’s nice to be able to speak to people on the phone, but it’s nice to see people as well.”

(2011)

Annex 1

Summary profile of Wave 7 participants

Sex	Age	Job	Location	Years in study
F	18	Civil servant	Edinburgh	4
M	22	Delivery man	London	6
F	23	Trainee Doctor	Plymouth	6
M	25	Planning assistant	Stevenage	1
M	28	Banker	London	7
M	32	Web officer	Cardiff	6
F	34	Fundraising manager	Cardiff	6
M	37	Engineer	Derbyshire	7
F	38	Housewife	Essex	6
F	45	Housing officer	Coventry	7
M	50	Unemployed	Belfast	4
F	50	Catering worker	London	6
F	67	Retired	Edinburgh	4
F	75	Retired	Bucks	7
F	78	Retired	Coventry	7