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Constructing the ‹Media Competent› Child:
Media Literacy and Regulatory Policy in the UK

Over the past fifteen years, sociologists have mounted an influential challenge to traditional psychological accounts of childhood. The new sociology of childhood has presented a powerful critique of the developmentalist view of children as merely ‹adults in the making›. Such a view, it is argued, judges children only in terms of what they will become in the future, once they have been adequately socialised: they are seen as inherently vulnerable, incomplete and dependent. The notion of competence has been a key term in this argument: children, it is suggested, need to be seen as autonomous agents, who are self-regulating, competent to make their own decisions and to negotiate with adults on an equal basis. (For instances of this approach, see James and Prout, 1990; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 1994, 2002.) This view is not confined to academic research. It is also widely recognised by professionals working in children's services; and to some extent, it has been enshrined in legislation relating to children's rights.

Sociologists of childhood have largely neglected the role of the media, despite their self-evident significance in children's lives. Yet there are clear parallels between the approach I have outlined and that adopted by many media researchers. Qualitative research on children's uses and interpretations of media – particularly within the Cultural Studies tradition – has increasingly moved away from the notion that children are merely innocent and vulnerable, and hence in need of adult ‹protection›. On the contrary, children are now seen as an ‹active› audience: they possess a form of

‹media literacy› – in effect, of ‹media competence› – that enables them to make sophisticated, critical judgments about what they watch and read. (For instances of this approach, see Buckingham, 1993; Davies, 2001; Tobin, 2000.) Some popular commentators have gone further, suggesting that children are in many respects more competent than adults in their dealings with media and digital technology (see McDonnell, 1993; Rushkoff, 1996; Tapscott, 1998). Here again, such arguments are also widely accepted by practitioners: media producers are increasingly inclined to argue that children are a demanding, ‹media-wise› audience that is difficult to persuade and to satisfy.

One of the most evident dangers of this approach, however, is that it may lead to a celebratory stance. As I have argued elsewhere (Buckingham, 2000), this approach provides a useful corrective to traditional views of children as merely passive victims of media influence; but in many respects it is just as sentimental as the approach it seeks to displace. In line with Romantic views of childhood, children are seen here to possess a form of spontaneous, natural wisdom that somehow automatically protects them from corruption. To this extent, any kind of adult intervention would seem to be quite superfluous – if not an unwarranted imposition of adult power. For example, in terms of education, it is hard to see where such views might lead – for if children are already competent in their dealings with media, it is far from clear what remains for them to learn. Likewise, it is hard to see any basis here for regulating the media – whether ‹negatively›, in terms of restricting children's access, or ‹positively›, in terms of provision that will meet the specific needs of children.

In this article, I want to consider how recent research on children and media relates to public policy, and specifically to current debates about media regulation in the UK. Debates about the media are obviously an important arena for contemporary concerns about childhood. For example, current debates about paedophiles on the internet, the influence of violent video games or television, or the possibility of banning advertising aimed at children, clearly reflect much broader tensions and anxieties to do with the place of children and their status or power relative to adults. Changes in media policy relating to children inevitably invoke much broader assumptions and discourses about childhood – not least about children's competence (or incompetence), and how that might be defined. My article addresses a very specific set of debates that are currently taking place in Britain around changes in media policy; but it goes on to address some

broader questions about where researchers and educators stand in these debates, and how we might intervene in them.

Changing Policies

Late in 2003, the British government passed a new Communications Act. It was a comprehensive, far-reaching, although in some ways rather contradictory, piece of legislation. The key move was to combine the regulation of telecommunications media and broadcasting (or at least some aspects of broadcasting, because the BBC will continue to have its own system of self-regulation). We now have a new super-regulator called Ofcom (the Office for Communication), which regulates the whole range of electronic media, both in terms of issues to do with commercial competition and in terms of what we might loosely call the public good – the social responsibility of the media, and their accountability to their audiences. (Details of this Act may be found at: http://www.legislation.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2003/20030021.htm.)

In fact, the Communications Act represents a complex balance of deregulation and re-regulation. On the one hand, it provides an extension of the government's commitment to the so-called ‹free market› in cultural goods – in effect, to privatisation. For example, the Act loosens some of the previous regulations on cross-media ownership, so that it will now be possible for Rupert Murdoch to own a national terrestrial television channel in addition to owning the sole platform for satellite television in the UK and a couple of its leading daily newspapers (as well as his growing international media empire).

On the other hand, however, the Act has to be seen to be addressing the social responsibility of the media – and not least, to address some of the continuing controversies about the apparently harmful effects of the media on children. Yet it seeks to accomplish this in a relatively novel way, by attempting to delegate responsibility for regulation from the public sphere of the state, or of government, to the private sphere of the individual ‹citizen-consumer›.

In doing so, the legislation acknowledges the fact that centralised regulation has become increasingly difficult to achieve. This is partly a result of the advent of new technologies: traditional forms of regulation are much harder to sustain in an age of multi-channel television, digital video and the internet, which offer unprecedented possibilities both in terms of the distribution of media content, and in terms of access. However, it also reflects the difficulty that regulators face in terms of legitimacy: their legitimacy depends upon appearing to speak on behalf of society as a whole, to be upholding what are seen to be ‹community standards›, and yet in contemporary multicultural, fragmented societies, with a growing political commitment to ‹free speech›, this seems to be more and more difficult to achieve (Thompson and Sharma, 1998).

Both on technological and on ideological grounds, therefore, media regulation is increasingly having to move towards an emphasis on consumer autonomy. Rather than restricting access to material that is deemed to be morally harmful, it is increasingly recognising citizens' rights to make informed decisions on their own behalf about what they should see or hear or read. However, the crucial point here is that these decisions should be informed: if people are to be trusted to make decisions for themselves, then they have to be shown to be competent to do so – and if they are to be competent, then they need to be properly informed and educated. They have to become – indeed, learn how to be – competent consumers.

Hence, a key part of the remit of Ofcom, the new regulatory body, is to do with what it calls ‹media literacy›. A clause in the Communications Act gives Ofcom responsibility for ‹promoting› media literacy – and it has come to define media literacy, in rather generalised terms, as the ability to ‹access, understand and create› media. Media literacy is to some extent inevitably framed here as a matter of self-protection, of being able to filter out or deal with things that might be found inappropriate or unwelcome – and thus there is a moral discourse (or a discourse about media effects) that continues to inform the debate. Yet in practice, media literacy is being defined rather more broadly, as a kind of cultural competence – a matter of understanding how the media work, of being able to access and evaluate what you see, and to match it to your needs as a consumer. In this sense, the term ‹media literacy› may come close to the German expression ‹Medienkompetenz› – media-competence.

Education is seen here as one (although by no means the only) way of ‹promoting› media literacy; and to this extent, media education is now achieving a degree of recognition and support from government that is quite unprecedented. Indeed, the British Minister for Culture, Tessa Jowell, has even gone on record as saying that media literacy will be ‹as important to children's lives as citizens› as other school subjects like science and mathematics – a claim that met with predictable criticism from the conservative press (Jowell, 2004). Although Britain has a very long history

of media education, there has been an uphill struggle over the past several decades to convince the government of the need for children to study the modern media; and so for those of us who have worked in this field for many years, this is (to say the least) an extraordinary development.

How – or indeed whether – this educational dimension will be carried through remains to be seen. Significantly, the drive to promote media literacy comes from the Ministry of Culture and not from the Ministry of Education (the Department of Education and Skills), which has long proven very resistant to media education, particularly in the context of the National Curriculum. In this paper, however, I want to focus more on the implications in terms of media regulation; and in particular, on how such moves construct or define the child. In some ways, this shift towards ‹consumer sovereignty› in media regulation could be seen as a form of democratisation; although, as I shall argue, it could equally be regarded as merely a more subtle form of governance.

The Politics of Fat

There are undoubtedly some interesting paradoxes here. For example, one of the most hotly contested debates in the UK over the past couple of years has been about the media's role in childhood obesity. There is growing concern, as in many other countries, about the rise in childhood obesity, and the future implications for the funding of the health service. The fat child has become a new kind of folk devil, a rapacious, insufficiently socialised monster.

As is often the case in such debates, commentators tend to blame the media. In fact, there may be many complex reasons for the rise in obesity. One of them may be that the government is so obsessed with pushing up educational standards that it has seriously cut back on the amount of time children spend doing physical education in schools. But – as with violence – blaming the media always provides an easy option, and it gets attention for politicians who need to be seen to be ‹doing something› about the problem. So there have been mounting calls for the government to regulate the advertising of so-called ‹junk food› to children – and some critics point to countries like Sweden, where all advertising aimed at children is banned (at least on terrestrial television).

In practical terms, this call to ban such advertising raises some quite difficult questions – not least to do with how you define ‹junk food›. (For example, advertisers are keen to point out that fruit juice is higher in sugar

content, and more harmful for teeth, than sugary soda drinks; and they argue that food is only ‹junk› when consumed in excess, and to the exclusion of other foods.) Obesity is clearly not only a matter of particular foods, but about overall diet and about levels of activity. As a result, it would be quite difficult for government to provide a clear and sustainable rationale for what is to be banned, and why.

However, this debate also raises bigger issues about the influence of advertising. As with the debate about sex and violence in the media, children tend to be defined here as innocents in need of protection – as somehow at risk of being corrupted by the powerful influence of the media. Here we find the classic image of the incompetent child – the child that is too immature, too irrational, too inexperienced, too cognitively undeveloped, to know what is happening or to be able to resist it. Despite developments in academic research and in the media industries themselves, it is this construction of the child that continues to dominate the public debate about children and the media.

Nevertheless, research on the influence of advertising, and particularly on how people make food choices, suggests that this is a rather more complicated issue. While there is a considerable amount of debate on the matter, many researchers argue that advertising is actually a relatively insignificant influence on food choice, compared with issues such as cost and availability and the amount of time people have to cook and go shopping. Indeed, this was broadly the conclusion of Ofcom's own review of research on the matter (Ofcom, 2004). More to the point, research also tends to show that children are well aware of the persuasive intentions of advertising from a relatively young age: again, there is some debate about the matter, but it is generally agreed that by the time they reach the age of eight, most children are capable of mobilizing quite a cynical discourse about advertising (Young, 1990). I have interviewed children who will describe at length and in great detail, and with a good deal of hilarity, how advertisements are full of lies, about how the products they are selling are really rubbish, and about how the claims of advertising are always exaggerated and false (e. g. Buckingham, 1993: Chapter 7).

At least on the face of it, children are very keen to present an image of themselves as entirely competent – as more than able to see through the false claims of advertising, and capable of making rational decisions about what they buy. Of course, one can see why it would be in their interest to do so – not least because they are bound to be aware of the public discourse

that presents them as quite the opposite. By displaying their expertise as critics of advertising, children are effectively answering back to the public debate.

In fact, I would argue that there are some limitations to this competence or ‹media literacy›. There is a rather superficial cynicism which children can easily assume when they talk about advertising – although the same is undoubtedly true of adults. Of course, the fact that you can appear to be cynical about something does not necessarily mean that it does not influence you. I would also argue that children are less aware of some less visible forms of advertising, such as sponsorship, branding and product placement – let alone the ways in which the internet is used for commercial gain, for example by gathering consumer information (see Seiter, 2004). However, I doubt that children are necessarily any less aware of these things than the majority of adults.

Where does this leave us in terms of the public debate? One possible response is precisely to assert the competence of children – to argue that children are not so easily influenced, and hence that banning advertising (or a particular kind of advertising) probably would not have the desired effect in terms of changing their eating habits. This argument puts researchers in a slightly uncomfortable alliance with the advertising industry, which of course is also keen to do whatever it can to resist the calls for stricter controls. In the advertising industry, as in the media industries in general, there is a very strong official rhetoric about children – a view of children as ‹media-savvy›, as sophisticated, discerning and demanding – in short, as competent consumers (see Buckingham et al., 1999). Indeed, there is a striking coincidence here between researchers' construction of the media literate child and the commercial construction of the competent child consumer – between a liberal, democratising rhetoric, and a market-driven rhetoric that seeks to assert children's consumer sovereignty.

At the time of writing, it is hard to tell whether the British government actually will ban junk food advertising – or any advertising – to children. In fact, the media regulator Ofcom has publicly argued that it should not; although some government ministers are keen to assert the need for ‹action›. The practical difficulties – and the potential for legal battles – are quite considerable. More to the point, the government's central commitment to neo-liberal economic policies makes it reluctant to interfere in the ‹free market›: here again, its preference is for self-regulation rather than control from above.

What the government is doing, and will continue to do, is to assert the need to ‹promote media literacy›. To be cynical, one could argue that this is a way of ‹passing the buck›: since the government is not going to exercise control, people will have to do it for themselves. If we have an audience of informed consumers, so the argument goes, it won't really matter if Rupert Murdoch controls the British media. Likewise, it isn't really necessary to control advertising, because we have competent consumers who are perfectly capable of making up their own minds about what they should buy. Yet, as I have suggested, this could equally be seen as a democratising move: rather than paternalistically insisting that it knows what is best, and that it will tell people what to do, government offers a kind of autonomy, and the opportunity for people to make decisions on their own behalf.

The Limits of the Self-Regulating Consumer

There are two immediate difficulties with this emphasis on competence and self-regulation, however. The first is to do with who is actually being defined as the consumer (or the ‹citizen-consumer›) here – particularly when it comes to children. In practice, the state appears to be passing responsibility for regulation not so much to children but to parents, and also to some extent to teachers. It is parents (and less directly teachers) who will now be primarily responsible for regulating children's media consumption, and for ensuring that they behave in an informed and responsible way.

As Sonia Livingstone has pointed out in relation to the internet, this is quite problematic in a situation where many parents may actually be rather less ‹media literate›, or simply less engaged in new media, than their children (Livingstone and Bober, 2004). It is particularly difficult in the context of a broader shift that is happening – at least in liberal capitalist countries – towards a democratisation of relationships within the family (Silva and Smart, 1999). As the preferred mode of childrearing has shifted from an authoritarian to a ‹pedagogical› mode, based on reasoning and discussion, it would seem less and less realistic to expect parents to be preventing their children from playing violent video games or surfing inappropriate sites on the internet. This shift in the locus of control appears to place a burden on parents that many of them are not equipped or even willing to exercise (see Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

Secondly, the discourse of ‹media literacy› provides a normative view of how good, responsible citizens should relate to the media. Implicitly or explicitly, we are urged to aspire to the condition of being wise consumers,

or rational viewers – and in the process, elements of emotional investment, or of pleasurable intensity, are implicitly seen as dangerous, and as something to overcome or to disavow. In effects, the discourse offers an ‹adultist› definition of media literacy – or media competence – albeit one which it would probably be hard to apply to the majority of real adults.

Furthermore, there is clearly a social class dimension to this definition. My own research suggests that there are significant differences in terms of children's media access, uses and interpretations that are partly determined by social class (Buckingham, 1993). Attempting to claim a particular mode of engagement with media as ‹more literate› is normative – and ultimately runs the risk of presenting middle-class ‹educated› taste as the norm. Indeed, there is a real danger here in privileging a kind of superficial cynicism, which middle-class children in particular are often very fluent in adopting – a position which in the classroom often becomes implicated in the game of teacher-pleasing (Buckingham et al, 1990). Ultimately, then, there is a risk that the notion of ‹media literacy› favours a rationalistic model – a normative ‹adult› notion of the sophisticated, media-smart consumer that actually belies the complexity and diversity of children's engagements with media.

However, there is a broader issue at stake here too. The emphasis on media literacy could be seen as part of a broader strategy of ‹responsibilisation› – of making people individually responsible for things from which the state seems to have retreated. Another example here would be the UK government's recent redefinition of the unemployed as ‹jobseekers› – a definition that constructs people without work as active, choosing, autonomous citizens who can take charge of their own lives, even if the conditions that keep them unemployed may in fact be far beyond their control (Dean, 1998). This strategy of ‹responsibilisation› seems to be particularly prevalent in the so-called caring professions and in education; and it is particularly apparent in the popularity of self-help literature, which similarly encourages readers to act on themselves to improve their lives (Rimke 2000). The emphasis here is on the exercise of personal autonomy – rather than on the operation of the state – as the means of ensuring individual well-being.

This critique derives in turn from a broader analysis of the ways in which government, or the management of populations, has shifted in ‹late modern› liberal democracies. This account is broadly influenced by the approach of Michel Foucault (e. g. Foucault, 1977), and it is developed by,

among others, the British sociologist Nikolas Rose (1999). The argument here is that the state has shifted from government to governance – from an authoritarian mode of control to one that is based on self-regulation, and even self-surveillance. According to Rose and others, this is the only form of control that is compatible with liberal democracies' ideological emphasis on individual autonomy. It is argued that neo-liberal regimes have ‹rolled back› the boundaries of the welfare state, not in order to remove power but to further embed it at the level of the individual. They govern less through the formal institutions of the state, and more through forms of ‹expertise› that seemingly lie beyond it – for instance, in the 'caring professions', in the media or the family – and that encourage action on the self, by the self.

What Anthony Giddens (1991) rather benignly sees as ‹self-reflexivity› or the ‹project of the self› is seen from this perspective as a rather more sinister – or at least less apparently empowering – form of control, or even of oppression. For in requiring individuals to determine their own lives, to secure their own happiness and self-fulfilment, rather than looking to the authority of the state or religion or traditional morality, governance places a burden on us that we may not all be equally able or even willing to bear.

From this perspective, placing an emphasis on competence in public policy is another form of responsibilisation. Competence comes to be seen as a kind of prerequisite for the self-regulation and self-government that modern liberal democracies require. The media-competent, media-literate consumer is the one who learns to regulate their own behaviour, to behave rationally and responsibly in line with the demands of government. The competent consumer is already a ‹good little citizen›, who does not need to be told what to do, because he or she already knows.

Beyond Media Competence

This Foucauldian argument provides a kind of meta-critique of contemporary policy-making, but it is hard to see what kinds of practical interventions it might permit or encourage. Indeed, it may prove quite paralysing when it comes to contributing to public policy debates of the kind I have described. Clearly, researchers should not be solely driven by the political imperatives of public debate; but they also need to be able to contribute to those debates in ways that might make a practical difference.

As I have implied, research and debate about children's relationships with media have been caught in a rather polarised, either/or argument that is ultimately quite unproductive. On the one hand, we have a construction of

the incompetent child, the child as vulnerable innocent, as media victim; and on the other, we have the celebration of the competent child, the child as sophisticated, media literate, autonomous. As I have suggested, both of these images – the innocent child and the wise child – are equally romantic, and indeed sentimental; and in some ways, they are two sides of the same coin. Attempting to intervene in public policy debates about the meaning of ‹media literacy›, and the ways in which it might be effectively promoted – as I and my colleagues are currently attempting to do (see Buckingham, 2005) – requires a more pragmatic approach. It also requires us to address some fundamental – but nevertheless very difficult – questions.

If children are indeed already competent, there seem to be few grounds for suggesting that there is anything they do not know. Indeed, to do so would appear merely patronising. However, there undoubtedly are things children – and indeed many adults – do not know about the media, particularly about how the media operate as industries. The imperatives of policy-making require a degree of certainty about what this knowledge is, and some commitment to the idea that people (both adults and children) need to acquire it.

Likewise, if we are seeking to ‹promote› media literacy, we need some way of understanding how media literacy develops or is acquired. Children are not born competent, they gradually become competent – and indeed, one of the ways in which they do this is by observing and imitating adults. While acknowledging the limitations of normative, a-social theories, we clearly need a theory of development that will enable us to understand this process. We also need a theory of instruction that does not regard education as merely an unwarranted, paternalistic, even authoritarian intrusion on children's autonomy.

The discourse of competence or literacy (like discourses of rights and citizenship) inevitably tends to universalise. But policy also requires us to differentiate between individual children, or between social groups: it requires us to recognise that opportunities to acquire and exercise competence depend upon social circumstances, and that differences in those circumstances might result in different ‹levels› of literacy. Furthermore, it requires us to recognise that there may be aspects of the media that people do not wish to see or experience or know about, and from which they may ask for protection – such as pornography or racist propaganda. Can we necessarily assume that individuals are able to self-regulate effectively, or even that they are best placed to judge what they need, or what is good for them?

For some, these issues might seem self-evident. Yet they go against the grain of what I have argued is a growing orthodoxy around the notion of children's competence. Indeed, it has become almost impossible to ask such questions from a sociological perspective: terms such as development and protection – and, in some respects, even teaching – have increasingly come to be regarded as almost politically incorrect. We should certainly beware of any automatic assumption that incompetence is a necessary condition of childhood; but we should equally beware of merely celebrating children's competence.

The emphasis on media literacy within current regulatory policy could be regarded as democratic, and even as liberating or empowering for children. Yet there is a danger that we buy into an ‹adultist›, rationalistic, normative conception of competence that is not simply unrealistic, but also limits what we mean by competence and who is able to get access to it. Before we leap to construct children as already competent, we need to be careful that we do not merely seek to redefine children as adults – or rather to redefine them in terms of a certain fantasy about how adults ought to be.

Note

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