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0521780772 - 'Dear BBC': Children, Television Storytelling and the Public Sphere

Maire Messenger Davies

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Introduction

Isn't it amazing how hard people work to raise their children? . . . For every grownup you see, there must have been at least one person to lug them around, and feed them . . . for years and years without a break. Teaching them how to fit into civilisation, and how to talk back and forth with other people, taking them to zoos and parades and educational events, telling them all those nursery rhymes and word of mouth fairytales. Isn't that surprising?

Character in *The Clock Winder*, by Anne Tyler, 1972, pp. 258–9

If you want to know what children like, you have to think like one or base it on your small brother or your cousin, you have to base it on them.

Boy, 10, inner-London primary school

The BBC has, I think, a special responsibility that transcends, while it cannot afford to ignore, ratings and reach. Our responsibility is to supply a distinctive public service offering information, education and entertainment, which extends young people's choices and lifts their horizons.

Sir Christopher Bland, Chair of Governors, *The BBC and Children*, BBC, August 1996

This book has three main origins, each in some sense based on the spirit of the quotations above. To begin with the last: the practical origins of the book are an empirical study, funded by the BBC and the London Institute, with children aged between 5 and 13 years, in different parts of England and Wales, carried out during 1996 and 1997. The study's primary aim was to assess children's responses to televised storytelling, including programmes made especially for children, as well as drama programmes made for adults, which are watched by children. Its immediate goal was to inform BBC policy, and a report was delivered to the BBC in June 1997 for internal consideration.

The study was seen as necessary at the time because the BBC, as a major public service broadcaster, was, and is, having to adapt to the fact that broadcasting around the world is changing irrevocably from a channel-scarcity system to a system where viewers are promised access to hundreds of channels, via digital technology, and where the subjective

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experience of viewing is expected to change from 'passive entertainment' to 'interactivity' and consumer choice through new computer technology. The commissioning of this study was an example of one of the many changes that overtook British broadcasting during the 1990s – the perceived necessity to consult 'the market', as well as relying on traditions of public service, in forming editorial policy.

This book draws on data from this study to discuss the uses, pleasures and meanings derived by children of different ages from the broadcasting services they currently know, as well as their views about the new services beginning to wean them away from them. The book asks whether this relationship can survive in a new millennium when traditional forms of entertainment may be displaced, and when regulation by national governments for special children's media provision may become impossible. Changing ideas about childhood, and the increasing sophistication of children as media consumers, have also contributed to the raising of question marks over children's ideal relationship with broadcasting. The book's most central question asks: what do children themselves think that the future of media entertainment for them will, and should, be, and what can their explanations tell us about the changing nature of childhood, and its relationship with culture?

Reconstructing childhood

Implicit in the debate about what is appropriate entertainment for children in the twenty-first century, who should provide it, and who should regulate it, are changing ideas about the nature of childhood. Sociologists of childhood have pointed out that the idea of 'childhood' (as distinct from actual children) is a social construction, which varies across time and space. They also point out the powerlessness of children within complex modern societies. Paradoxically, as more institutions have come into being to protect and improve the status of children during the twentieth century, so children's lives themselves have become, in many ways, more constrained. Prout and James (1997, p. 32) point to the fact that 'almost all political, educational, legal and administrative processes have profound effects on children, but they [children] have little or no influence over them'.

The research described in this book aims to remedy this lack of consultation by putting forward a portrait of the child as citizen-in-the-making, capable of operating intelligently and purposefully in the public sphere, while at the same time displaying the more familiar characteristics of the child-as-consumer model, and the child-as-vulnerable-victim model. It suggests that none of these characteristics are mutually

exclusive in any individual child or groups of children, and that debates about the nature of childhood have not always taken into account the complexity of children's lives and personalities, and their ability to move between different roles according to context – an ability which engagement with popular media is particularly well equipped to encourage. Sociological and historical debates about the nature of childhood are also conspicuously lacking in comments from children themselves.

Thus, the second origin of the book is democratic, and responds to 10-year-old J's assertion above that if you want to know what children think, you have to 'think like them'. More will be said about children as potential citizens and their rights – if they have such rights – to be heard, later in the book. Put simply, the structure of the book takes a series of topics on which adult media analysts, journalists, sociologists of childhood, historians, psychologists, teachers, parents and media professionals have been debating for years, and provides children with the opportunity to join in. In doing so, it is an attempt to bring the views of the large and diverse group of children who took part in the study into the 'public sphere'.

The public sphere

The term 'public sphere' to discuss the circulation of information as a civic function, was first used by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1962) and ever since has served as a heuristic for reflections on the participation, or not, of various groups in civil society, including women, workers, writers and, as in this case, children and young people. Habermas (1962, p. 25) defined 'the public sphere' as a product of the rise of the literate bourgeoisie during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their conversations, discussions, printed essays, satires and journalism constituted 'a forum in which the private people, [having] come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion'. Feminists such as Joanna Meehan (1995) have pointed out that this view of 'the public sphere' was a very masculine one, and marginalised aspects of the 'private sphere' which did not equate the interests of the private person (*homme*) with the public one (*citoyen*). The private person, as Habermas's use of these phrases indicates, was masculine, and he was characterised as 'simultaneously an owner of private property who, as *citoyen* was to protect the stability of the property order as a private one. Class interest was the basis of public opinion' (Habermas, 1962, p. 87).

The invention of mass broadcasting in the mid twentieth century was seen by Habermas as destructive of the Enlightenment public sphere,

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leading to a 're-feudalisation' of the relationships between those in power and their subjects/citizens. 'The media . . . functioned as manipulative agencies controlling mass opinion, in contrast to the early press which had facilitated the formation and expression of organic, public opinion' as James Curran (1991, pp. 38–9) put it. Broadcasting has helped to break down both the physical and discursive barriers between public and private spheres in ways which have been much lamented. Education professor Neil Postman, in *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), deplored the fact that television had destroyed the Enlightenment model of prolonged childhood, which originally came into being to educate *citoyens* (if not *citoyennes*) for their public roles.

When first radio in the 1920s, and then television in the 1950s, broadcast public affairs and events directly into the home, public affairs could no longer be kept exclusively outside the domestic sphere. Even more worrying from a cultural pessimist's point of view, radio, and later television, began to represent forms of private behaviour – whether in drama, comedy, gameshows or talk shows – which for American critics such as Joshua Meyrowitz (1984) and James Twitchell (1992) were vulgar, objectionable and destructive of the necessary barriers between public and private. Even the early, ostensibly democratising pioneers of cultural studies in Britain, such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, who demanded more diverse and populist definitions of art and culture than those offered by the traditional education and arts establishments, have objected to some of the material produced by popular television for universal consumption in the home.

The key implication of the development of mass broadcasting for the purposes of the topic of this book is its impact on the domestic sphere, the sphere of the home – of women, and, of course, of children. When public issues of politics, economics and cultural expression, as well as the representation of different and unfamiliar kinds of private behaviour, invade the private sphere of the home via the broadcast airwaves, children (and women) become exposed to information that they might never otherwise have encountered, and traditionally was never intended for them. With the exception of the French *salonnières* and the educated daughters of enlightened men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, women and children had no part in Habermas's bourgeois enlightened public sphere. And, as Neil Postman revealingly explains, so long as print was the dominant medium of communication, this state of affairs could be maintained. Until the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and the USA, the vast majority of women and children were denied formal education and hence access to print literacy, and, in large parts of the world, they still are. With radio

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and television, broadcasting has become the dominant public medium, and both women and children have as much access to its products – if not yet to its production – as men do. However, the more interactive products of the convergence between computers and other media are already allowing domestic consumers to have more control over the production of mass media. This, too, is generating public concern. Hence the continuing debate, which shows no signs of diminishing, about ‘harmful effects’ of invasive media representations on young and ‘vulnerable’ (including female) minds.

This brings me to the third of my three initial quotations – the one about adults’ years of ‘lugging’ and ‘civilising’ children in order to ‘get them grown’. Many of the debates about children’s relationship with media – the moral panics, the cultural pessimism – have been conducted, as it were, high over the heads of the people responsible for looking after, working with and shaping children’s daily lives – parents, relatives, teachers, childminders and professional storytellers, including those working for children in the media, as well as children themselves, who also look after each other. Children’s relationships with the people who, somehow or other, ‘get them grown’, do not feature prominently in cultural pessimism/moral panic discourses, because the very fact of children ‘getting grown’ (and all the feeding, cleaning, transporting, nursing and training that go into it) implicitly denies a wholly pessimistic view of the relationship between children and adult society. As Tyler’s character observes, the very fact that so many adults – even, as she later comments, delinquent ones – go to so much trouble to do all this lugging and caring, is ‘amazing’. Like many amazing phenomena, the diurnal and unending effort of ‘getting children grown’ is not often noticed; like housework, and office administration, it is only noticed when it is not done. It is symptomatic of the dearth of academic acknowledgement of it that, in seeking for a literary quotation to represent it, I had to go to a novel, by one of the most sympathetic writers about family life currently in print, not to a scholarly textbook.

The account of the research set out in this book is an account of a relationship or, more accurately, a series of relationships, between a group of adults (the researchers), and a large number of children who were willing to confide their opinions to these adults, because of an obvious implicit trust in the grown-up organisation which those adults represented: the BBC. The comments from children in this book reflected to us, when we first read them, an ‘amazing’ openness, indicative of a confident and confiding relationship with the discursive public sphere as represented by the broadcasters, and also with us, whom they comfortably, and, humbly, accepted as the representa-

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tives of these trusted broadcasters. As the title of the book suggests, these children repeatedly took the opportunity to address the organisation directly as an 'auntie' or 'grown-up brother', or occasionally a wayward parent figure, in tones of presumed intimacy, as well as adopting other kinds of tone in other kinds of discursive tasks (as described in later chapters).

The account of the research in the book is, I hope, partly an expression of the need among adults involved in 'the hard work' of 'lugging' and 'civilising' children to give a structured expression of this experience in terms which illustrate how that civilising process might work. The book describes not only the work of the various adults privileged to be co-operating with these children in the research itself, but also the work and attitudes of some of the adults who have been charged with the 'special responsibility', as Sir Christopher Bland put it, of 'extending young people's choices and lifting their horizons' within the British broadcasting system: producers, writers, directors and policy-makers. In addition to the professional storytellers, with their modern versions of 'nursery rhymes and word of mouth fairytales', the book draws on implicit – and sometimes explicit – comments from children, about the adults in the backgrounds of their lives – parents, relatives, older siblings, teachers and other people they knew, although none of these people was interviewed directly. (To preserve the confidentiality of this information, no schools or children are referred to by name.)

As children took on adult decision-making roles in designing broadcast schedules, their views of how adults both did, and ought to, behave, were revealed. In the long-running public debates and 'moral panics' about the corruption of childish innocence by cultural products, the private sphere of the caring adult–child relationship, particularly when this relationship takes a non-newsworthy, benevolent form, rarely appears. The relationship between the adult world and the child's revealed by some of the comments in this book, gives, I hope, some hint of the supportive aspects of the relationship between children and the adult world, in both the public and the private spheres – although I hope the book is not complacent about less benevolent aspects of these relationships.

The issue of direct effects, for long almost the only issue in which children's status as members of a mediated society has been recognised, will be discussed in more detail in chapters 5 and 6. Whether or not media have good or bad effects is not the issue for the purpose of this book. The starting-point for the book is the ways in which children in this study expressed their opinions on matters of public, as well as private, importance, including the question of effects, all of which

constituted an assertion to the listening adults, that 'we, the children, belong in this debate too'. This book is, to an extent, their forum, and its subsequent chapters are their topics. It would be difficult to summarise the case for allowing children's voices to be heard on these topics more succinctly than 10-year-old J, and his view that: 'If you want to know what children like, you have to think like one.' If you cannot 'think like one', as he pointed out, the next best thing is to ask some children.

Constructing and disappearing childhood

As I shall discuss later, in chapter 3, childhood studies, which have burgeoned in the 1990s, do not specifically deal with children themselves (nor, for that matter, with the adults who look after them) – a development which, Neil Postman (1982, p. 5) argued, suggested that our culture has lost interest in real children. 'Of all the evidence [of the disappearance of childhood] none is more suggestive than the fact that the history of childhood has now become a major industry among scholars.' Postman (1982, p. 5) accuses Philippe Ariès, the French art historian, of 'starting the rush', since Ariès was one of the first to point out, in 1962, that 'childhood' is a social and cultural construct, with the implication that this construct may bear little resemblance to the day-to-day lived experience of actual children, and their parents. Television has played an enormously large part of the lives of Western children – at least in terms of time spent in its company – for the last thirty years – a fact lamented by scholars such as Postman. Yet, surprisingly, it is neglected by the new theorists of childhood following in Ariès' footsteps. For instance, *Theorizing Childhood* (1998) by Alison James, Alan Prout and Chris Jenks, a summary of the current state of the art of childhood studies, has no index references to 'media', or to 'broadcasting', only one to television, and only one to 'culture'.

Academic study of the relationship between children and television has fallen primarily to psychologists working within social-science traditions of research (my own discipline) in the USA (for example, Aimée Dorr), and to educationists who, in Britain, come from an academic background in English and/or film studies (for example, David Buckingham). Willard Rowland (1997, p. 103) argues that the American intellectual tradition, of applying social science to the study of meanings and texts, comes from a deep-rooted respect for science and its pragmatic application in a country 'that imagined itself as a laboratory for social and political experiments to be conducted over time in a process of competitive individual entrepreneurship'. This, says Rowland, set the

dominant forms of communication research as scientific-and-effects oriented. This tradition has led to a very great number of studies in the USA (see, for example, Comstock and Paik, 1991; Bryant and Zillman, 1994) seeking to identify the primarily harmful effects of media representations and messages on children – a public health, 'hypodermic' model of media influence which continues to flourish, despite Rowland calling it 'a myth'.

The field of empirically studying children themselves and their responses to media, has been almost entirely left to the social scientists who are part of this entrepreneurial 'laboratory' tradition, and they have dominated debates about media 'effects' and set the agenda in terms of concerns such as violence, and premature sexuality, although there is a more creative and productive field of study from cognitive psychologists who have studied the ways in which children learn from media (for example, Bryant and Anderson, 1983; Rice *et al.*, 1983; Dorr, 1986; Dorr *et al.*, 1990; Wright *et al.*, 1994) and psychologists and educators who have studied the meanings and effectiveness of 'media literacy' in its widest sense around the world (see for example, Kubey, 1997; Bazalgette and Buckingham, 1995). Cultural studies, deriving primarily from literary and humanities academic traditions, is more dominant in the study of media in Britain and Australia than is social science and psychology. Cultural studies scholars have paid comparatively little attention to children – particularly children under 12 – as audiences, with one or two exceptions, such as David Oswell in Britain, and Ellen Seiter and Marsha Kinder in the USA. Cultural studies, with its proliferating attentiveness to forms of popular culture such as soap opera, adult TV drama, and talk shows, has not paid much attention to cultural products *for* children either, including children's television. One outcome of the attention paid to children's TV drama in the study described in this book, is an attempt to redress the lack of critical attention to children's TV by producing some more critical writing about children's programmes (see, for example, Davies and Machin, 2000a, 2000b).

Cultural studies' response to psychological traditions of research, particularly studies on harmful effects, has often been oppositional. An example is the resistance of many in the field to suggestions that screen violence might be harmful to children, as discussed in chapter 6, a resistance based not so much on specific findings of social science research, as on the methods, and the credibility itself, of the whole field of social science scholarship, particularly of psychology. The possibility that children might be hurt by exposure to graphic depictions of the infliction of pain, or embarrassed and shocked by graphic portrayals of

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adult sex, and the desire of caring adults both to understand, and to prevent, such hurt, can become equated with an illiberal desire to impose indiscriminate censorship in all areas of public life. The resolution of this problem is not helped by the fact that the two concerns – protection of children, and protection of free speech – are dealt with in different academic domains: the care and protection of children, both of bodies and minds, are primarily the prerogative of medicine, education and the law. The care and protection of free speech tend to be the domain of philosophy, politics and the humanities. Both sorts of care and concern can produce politically liberal positions, yet they are often opposed, and this is not in the interests of children, nor of useful scholarship.

Reflexivity in research

Anxieties about validity and the importance of 'renegotiating the power relations between researcher and child' (Davis, 1998, p. 329) have led to a decline in the use of traditional social science methods for examining attitudes and behaviour, particularly in areas such as media and culture which are themselves the water in which we all swim. We can never remove children, or anyone else, from their social and cultural environment for the purposes of 'laboratory-based observation'. The laboratory itself is part of this cultural environment, and the research process is part of it too. As Buckingham, Davies, Jones and Kelley, in their history of British children's broadcasting (1999, p. 137), put it: 'the endless quest to know more about the child consumer is itself an intervention. Research does not only reflect tastes; it also subtly shifts them.' For some scholars, such as John Hartley (1992) or Ien Ang (1993, 1996), this has led to a logical stance from which they urge us to abandon all attempts to define, describe or, most impossible of all, measure, actual 'audiences' or 'real people'. However, scholarly research, too, is part of 'the public sphere' and has traditionally been called on – as were we in this study – to answer questions on behalf of public institutions. The kinds of public agencies who need to know about the relationship between children and media, such as the BBC, or national governments and their education departments, continue to want the nearest thing to reliable empirical data that can be managed, in order to inform policy.

In social science there is, in fact, an increasing demand for 'reflexivity' – an awareness of the research situation and its contribution to the interpretation of research findings. In a paper about reflexivity in research with children, Davis (1998, p. 329) argues:

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[research] should empower children . . . to become active participants in the research process, employing tools which offer children the maximum opportunity to put forward their views and reducing the social distance and renegotiating the power relations between researcher and child.

As Davis points out, research with children has an extra responsibility in that, first, it must be careful not to exploit their immaturity or to undermine their relationship with the adults legally responsible for them, parents and teachers; and, second, the techniques used must be appropriate, and designed to be comprehensible. We all have to be aware that 'talking television' (in Buckingham's, 1993, phrase), whether with researchers, other children or families, is not just an objective research procedure; it is an integral part of the processes whereby cultural traditions are established, changed or continued. It is, itself, a cultural, and enculturating, process. In the study described in this book, the children learned more about themselves as media consumers, potential citizens and critics, from the research tasks they performed, as did we, and as did their teachers. Through the discussions and negotiations of the tasks they were given, this learning process became transparent and explicit.

In response to the call for more self-awareness on the part of researchers, recent texts by media scholars offer accounts of parental engagement as a starting-point for discussing children's culture and the public/private interface between it and other areas of society. Steven Kline begins his account of the commercialised culture of American children's media, *Out of the Garden* (1993), with anxieties about his own small son and the film-based toys the child liked to play with. In *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), Henry Jenkins discusses his teenage son's passion for the virtual spaces of computer games and rather wistfully contrasts this with the physical freedom he enjoyed during his own boyhood. Marsha Kinder draws on the games and conversations of her young son and his friends throughout her discussion of TV cartoons, toys, advertising and post-modern intertextuality, in *Playing with Power* (1991). David Buckingham begins his book about the emotional impacts of media on children, *Moving Images* (1996), with a touching account of his little boy's fear of Big Bird in *Sesame Street*. All this is to be welcomed. As well as being of central concern to parents, the topic of childhood is one of which every human being has first-hand experience, and this experience is bound to influence adult discussions of the topic. As Carolyn Steedman (1995, p. 114) argues in *Strange Dislocations*, 'accounts of childhood space relate most directly to lost or unexplored concepts of the adult self'. James, Jenks and Prout (1998, p. 57) go further and