

Devils, angels and pester power: Why children need to be protected from television, and why parents need to be protected from children

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Abstract

This paper considers how the dichotomous construction of childhood which has traditionally underpinned Australian media policy, allowing governments to exert power over children by controlling the programming available to them, is being used to justify bans on junk food advertising. Through an analysis of scholarly and industry sources, supplemented by primary interview material, it finds that children are frequently denied the right to make rational decisions about their own television consumption. Furthermore the need to control children's program consumption extends to their consumption of advertising material, with similarly confused justifications. At the same time, the only power with which children are enthusiastically invested is pester power, something which parents are apparently powerless to resist and which provides an all too easy justification for bans on junk food advertising. Such bans however decimate the funding available for children's television production, leading to a steady reduction in the very material policy makers and parents appear keen for children to view.

Introduction

Since the 1960s successive Australian governments have exerted power over young audiences through media policies regulating Australian children's television production and consumption. These policies have determined both the amount and the nature of programmes available to the child audience. Although Australia's television policy instruments, particularly the Children's Television Standards, have historically been predicated upon concern for the needs of children to be protected from unsuitable material and to have programming made especially for them, their

existence provides many opportunities to control children's television choices. Furthermore it is not only government policy which has been able to shape what and how child audiences are able to see television; the producers of children's programmes have also been able to exert their influence as content gatekeepers of the shows they make. Additional power is thrust upon parents, through the 'PG' classification, which in a neat piece of legislative buck-passing, hands parents responsibility for deciding what material is suitable for their children, and what is not.

The acceptance in Australian society of this level of control over children's television choices suggests that the community at large is comfortable with the uneven power relationship thus created. All of this in spite of, or possibly because of, the well established difficulties inherent in the construction of childhood and the child audience. We have notoriously ambivalent attitudes towards children. On the one hand they are Enid Blyton innocents, hunting treasure and drinking ginger beer, to be protected at all costs. Witness the furore surrounding the ABC's decision to feature a child with lesbian parents on *Playschool* on May 31 2004, which led to condemnation from both sides of politics, with the then Minister for Children Larry Anthony accusing the producers of the programme of failing in their responsibility to parents (Nguyen, 2004). On the other hand they are devils who will indulge in unspeakable behaviour after the slightest exposure to unsuitable material. When the Honourable Mr Justice Moreland suggested in his summing up remarks at the 1993 trial of James Bulger's child killers Robert Thompson and Jon Venables that violent video films may have been in part responsible for Bulger's death, the reaction across all levels of British society was alarmist and extreme, particularly in the tabloid press. *The Sun* newspaper called for a ban on 'video nasties' and local video shops burned their copies of the video in question, the horror movie *Child's Play 3*, despite the fact there was no suggestion at their trial that the boys had even seen this video (Hill, 2001). There is little diversity in this construction of childhood, which underpins Australian media policy. Furthermore it is used to justify policy making which restricts the rights of all children to access television content.

A similar ambivalence is visible in the debate surrounding any ban on junk food advertising to children. The same children for whom we lovingly mashed organic pumpkin in their early months will become grotesquely obese gluttons if exposed to junk food advertising. Children are apparently powerless to resist junk food advertising, even if the evidence suggests children are becoming increasingly media literate (Buckingham et al., 2004). Parents are equally incapable of resisting their offspring's inevitable entreaties for junk food. Pester power then is the only type of power which children possess. Apparently it can destroy even the toughest parent's resolve; therefore advertising for this food should be banned.

Children's television policy in Australia

The relationship between the media and children in Australia has always been regarded as a special relationship which places a responsibility on the government and adult population (Keys, 1999, p. 9). The legislative attention paid to children's programming which culminated in the Children's Television Standards has a long history. The Australian Government formally recognised its responsibility to children as early as 1968 when the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) introduced an incentive scheme to encourage the broadcast of Australian children's programmes (Aisbett, 2000, p. 13). Prior to this time, there was "widespread community concern about the lack of good quality, age-specific children's programs produced in Australia and an increasing recognition by the government of the need for effective regulation" (Mencinsky & Mullen, 1999, p. 27). But it was the decision in 1979 of the newly created Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) to introduce the 'C' commercial television programme classification, combined with quota requirements for minimum hours of age-specific high quality children's programmes, which had the most profound effect on the quality and quantity of Australian children's programmes. The requirements for children's programming set out in 1979 evolved into the Children's Television Standards (Aisbett, 2000, p. 7) which are considered to be an important policy instrument in promoting good quality children's programmes in Australia. Indeed Mencinsky and Mullen (1999, p. 27) go as far as describing the Standards as "a notable example – if not benchmark – for how to regulate children's television in

the public interest". The dual system of commercial and public service broadcasting which exists in Australia has also contributed to an Australian belief in the 'special' treatment of young audiences, with a British public service ethos influencing Australian television since its inception. As Buckingham, Davies, Jones & Kelley (1999, p. 66) state, of British television:

Children have always been seen as a 'special' audience in debates about broadcasting – an audience whose particular characteristics and needs require specific codes of practice and regulation... Indeed, the provision of a distinct service for children could be seen as a defining principle of public service...

Currently the Children's Television Standards are under review by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), with 76 submissions received from diverse groups with equally diverse vested interests, including the Advertising Federation of Australia (AFA), the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) and the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). ACMA has also received 20,521 postcards as part of the campaign 'Pull the Plug on Food Advertising' organised by the Cancer Council NSW and the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC). One of the few submissions to contain direct quotes from children, the very audience about whom those making submissions are so concerned, is the ACFT's (ACTF, 2007). However despite the consultation with children undertaken by organisations such as the ACTF, there is no guarantee that governments will include the ACTF's input in their decisions. Plans to launch the ABC's dedicated children's channel, ABC3, something for which the ACTF lobbied hard, have been shelved by the ABC after the Rudd Government's decision to put its funding on ice (Hudson, 2008). The lack of children's voices in the submissions to ACMA would seem to support McKee's claim that in fact children's programmes are made for adults, to reinforce adults' ideas about what children should be like and should want to watch (McKee, 2001, p. 94). The history of Australia's children's media policy certainly suggests that adults know best.

Australian producers of children's programming also have a significant gate-keeping role in controlling the content that children can view, albeit under the auspices of the 'C' classification guidelines which form part of the Children's Television Standards. Interpretation of these guidelines is necessarily subjective and there is the added

pressure of ACMA giving the ‘C’ classification at script stage, i.e. before production has started but when homes may well have been mortgaged to raise finance. Keen to receive the precious ‘C’ classification for commercial reasons, and with their own view of the child audience in mind, producers may be over zealous in their gate-keeping role. As Jonathan Schiff, of Jonathan Schiff Productions, maker of internationally successful children’s shows such as *Ocean Girl* and *Thunderstone* says

I tend to be a more conservative gatekeeper than the regulatory structure here. To pre-empt their decision making process I’ve actually erred often too far the other way...in the past I’ve been more conservative than the ABA [ACMA’s predecessor] (personal communication, December 8, 2003).

Schiff concedes that post-9/11 he may have gone too far.

I self-censored what we were developing as a result of the fallout of 9/11 and we tended to steer towards comedy rather than a more balanced view about what children want (personal communication, December 8, 2003).

While it is impossible to protect children from exposure to news of terrorist attacks and for many children, from terrorist attacks themselves, Schiff appears to believe that television programmes made for children at least should avoid such subjects. Whether this is because of Schiff’s need to find a market for his productions and to avoid any political controversy or because of his own views on the suitability of such material for his young audiences is unclear. However in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Channel Ten concurred with him, pulling an episode of *Cybergirl* in which the heroine has to defuse a bomb planted in a bank (J. Schiff, personal communication, December 8, 2003). Such actions conform to the construction of children as innocents in need of protection, however one of the problems with this construction is that it leads to “the tendency... to avoid controversial and uncertain topics, but the result is to let the concerns of young people go unnoticed and therefore unaddressed” (Weaver 2004, pp.85-86). Despite our felt need to protect children from society’s evils, topics such as terrorist attacks are often addressed by adult television news reports, which children do see and which do make older children anxious (Valkenberg, Canor, & Peeters, 2000). If such topics were sensitively handled in a fictional context, perhaps we could help children address these fears, rather than pretending, pointlessly, that they do not exist. Or perhaps children deserve their own diverse television news

services. Currently the only dedicated news programme made for children in Australia is the ABC's *Behind the News*. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the BBC's *Newsround* is the sole provider of children's news, after the recent demise of two other channels' children's news programmes. Adults, however, have an intrinsic right to plurality of news services (Messenger Davies, 2007, p. 17). We do not accord children the same rights.

The third layer of control over children's viewing is handed to their parents, under the useful catch-all of the Parental Guidance (PG) classification. A PG programme "may contain careful presentations of adult themes or concepts but must be mild in impact and remain suitable for children to watch with supervision" (FreeTV Australia, 2007, p. 24). Simpson (2004, p. 27) exposes flaws in the PG classification, arguing that the majority of what parents have learned about the suitability of certain types of content for their children, be it entertainment, education or information, they have learned from their own television viewing, that is, from television itself. Furthermore, on a practical level, parental guidance is rarely executed, with many parents actually seeking their children's advice about what to watch. Indeed according to ACMA, only 45 percent of Australian households have rules, understandings or arrangements about the programmes their children watch, down from 74 percent in 1995 (ACMA 2007b, p. 117). Simpson (2004, pp. 27-29) contends that the PG classification allows often class-based judgements to be made about good and bad parents, while relieving any pressure on broadcasters to produce better quality children's programming.

With or without their parents sitting beside them, 0-14 year olds in 2005 were watching large amounts of reality television, with two episodes of *Big Brother* and one of *Australian Idol* appearing in their top 10 most popular choices. Neither of these shows is made specifically for children; indeed the only children's programming which appeared in this top 10 were the movies *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and *Stuart Little 2*, at numbers one and two respectively (ACMA, 2007a, p. 30). These viewing choices, which include significant amounts of what are generally considered 'adults' programmes, support Davies, Buckingham & Kelley's ((1999) assertion that "Children's television time is a provisional and contingent space, in

which competing definitions of childhood are continually vying for control”. Regardless of what children chose to watch, while the Children’s Television Standards may be under review at present, what does not appear to be under review is the assumption that children’s television must be tightly regulated by all powerful adults. Adults decide what constitutes ‘good’ television, the appropriate role for parents in guiding their children’s viewing, and the extent to which children are seen as active participants or passive consumers of television. These decisions are expressed through media policy (Simpson, 2004, p. 13). Adults may also conduct market research with children to ensure they are attracted to the programmes or products they are selling. For example in 2005 UK market research company Mediacom interviewed British children in four different age groups to discover whether they preferred home grown to imported programming (Messenger Davies, & Thornham, 2007, p. 16). However as the largest television advertising buyer in the UK market, Mediacom’s research is more about giving children whatever it takes to sell them efficiently to advertisers, than considering their rights as television viewers.

The child audience

Australian children’s television policy and the power inherent in it are built on shaky foundations, due to well-documented problems with the construction of childhood on which they are based. One of the defining characteristics of contemporary Western society is the construction of ‘childhood’ as a special psychological and physical developmental phase wherein children can be protected from the more demanding conditions of the adult world (Aries, 1962; Buckingham, 2000; Heywood, 2001). But deciding what is meant by the state of childhood is problematic because, as Keys (1999, p. 9) states

Children are seen on the one hand as innocent, natural and in need of protection, whilst on the other they are perceived as undeveloped, irrational and incomplete beings who must be disciplined and civilised.

Indeed defining a child simply in terms of his or her age is a moveable feast. Both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2007) define children as 18 years and under (HREOC, 2007). On the other hand ACMA and FreeTV Australia categorise children as age 14 and under in the Children’s Television Standards (FreeTV

Australia, 2007). Although the construction, and an age-specific definition of childhood are difficult, both inform and shape Australian children's television policy. The word power tends not to be used in these debates. Indeed as far as children's rights are concerned, "power and rights are not generally popular words. Adults prefer to talk about their care and authority or the need for firm control, rather than their power over children" (Griffith, 1996 as cited in John, 2003, p. 48). If children are not considered by adults to have rights regarding their own consumption of television programming, they are powerless.

Junk food advertising ban

However, not only are children at risk from unsuitable television programmes, it seems they are also at risk from unsuitable television advertising. The United Kingdom recently implemented a partial ban on junk food advertising, amid alarming reports of childhood obesity epidemics, caused allegedly by the advertising of junk food to young viewers. The ban consists of

a total ban in and around all children's programming and on dedicated children's channels as well as in youth-oriented and adult programs which attract a significantly higher than average proportion of viewers under the age of 16 (OFCOM 2006).

The ban is partial because it affects only dedicated children's programming and programmes which are viewed by a significant proportion of children (such as *The Simpsons*), rather than all pre-9pm programming. It was the culmination of three years of intense campaigning by the health lobby which remains convinced that television advertising is a major cause of childhood obesity. Hard evidence to support this claim has been difficult to produce, with an exhaustive report commissioned by the Food Standards Agency conceding that "promotion is just one part of the complex process of marketing and... measuring its effects on consumer behaviour is notoriously difficult" (Hastings et al., 2003, p. 11). Nonetheless the report concludes that advertising has a modest direct effect on eating habits and a larger indirect effect on children's food preferences, consumption and behaviour. It also states that social, cultural and environmental factors affect children's eating habits and that television advertising is just one influence (Hastings et al., 2003). The junk food advertising ban

has proved unpopular with health food lobbyists, broadcasters and programme makers alike. Healthy food lobbyists have accused the UK regulatory body the Office of Communication (OFCOM) of selling out to commercial interests, while commercial television operators have described the new regulations as ‘draconian’, claiming the loss of advertising revenue will put the future of production of UK children’s programming under threat (Gibson & Smithers, 2006). The UK independent producers’ lobby group PACT has expressed serious concern for the future of children’s television in the UK, arguing that turnover could be reduced by as much as 83 percent in the independent sector which specialises in children’s programmes and animation (PACT, 2006).

In 2002 the health lobby group CFAC was formed in Australia, its aim to ban all food advertising to children, regardless of whether the advertising is for ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ food. Such a ban would apparently eradicate any debate about what constitutes healthy or unhealthy food, and make any policing of the ban much easier (CFAC, 2007). In its 2007 briefing paper, CFAC argues both that “Children, particularly those less than eight years of age, are a naive and vulnerable audience who do not fully understand the purpose or nature of advertising. Therefore children need adequate protection from commercial exploitation” (p. 3) and that “Co-regulation cannot prevent beguiling children with effective, exciting and emotional images that make children want to try a promoted food – and pester their parents to get them” (p. 12). Pester power is defined by Brand (2007, p. 13) as “the actions of children, such as multiple requests and complaining, to persuade parents to purchase goods that parents might not otherwise intend to purchase”. He states that in the United States children aged between two and six who view more television advertising request more products (2007, p. 6) but concludes that “the correlation between exposure to television advertising and pestering parents to purchase products advertised is weak” (2007, p. 29).

The dichotomy inherent in the construction of childhood is again apparent here, and as Buckingham (1999) states:

The notion that children's leisure time should be occupied by activities that are wholly educational, and that they should somehow be protected from forms of consumerism that are quite acceptable for adults, points to a fear of what children might get up to if their behaviour is not sufficiently regulated and controlled.

Children are innocent and unsophisticated and require protection from marketing messages by adults, however, given the slightest exposure to advertising for unsuitable foods they are capable of controlling their parents via pester power. A junk food ban looks like a quick fix, despite the effects it has on the production of the very children's programmes many children's lobby groups care so much about. A great deal has been written about the effects of junk food advertising on children (Hastings et al., 2003; Brand, 2007; CFAC, 2007), but what is interesting here is that the only power with which we enthusiastically invest children is pester power. Media policy suggests they cannot make rational choices about what to watch on television, whether it be television programmes or television advertising, and their innocence or latent evil must not be disturbed. Therefore adults have the right and responsibility to decide these things on their behalf. However, the sternest parent's resolve will melt once their children start exerting their pester powers. Parents cannot, it appears, say no to their children, particularly when those children are demanding fatty, sugary foods in ever increasing quantities. Are children really this powerful suddenly, or is pester power merely a convenient cloak for the same wholesome construction of childhood, where children live on a diet of porridge, toast soldiers and baked custard, with a bottle of ginger beer on very special occasions? Combine this construction with the ease with which television can be made a scapegoat for problems which require more complex and difficult solutions and the enthusiasm for the ban on junk food is understandable. Much easier to send a pre-printed postcard to ACMA than to step out of one's SUV and make the school run on foot.

Conclusion

Even prior to the introduction of television to Australia, concern was being expressed about its effects on the child audience, and the need to regulate content appropriately (Simpson, 2004). Despite societal and technological changes which have affected the development of children's media policy in the last 50 years, the need to control

children's viewing has not been questioned. It is a given then that adults have the right to view whatever is readily available on television, at any time, and the concomitant power to control their own media consumption. Children have no such rights. The construction of childhood inherent in Australia's media policy does not appear to consider children to be rational creatures capable of making sensible or autonomous decisions about their own television viewing. Regardless of one's views on the suitability of certain types of content for child audiences and regardless of what each one of us understands by the term 'childhood', the fact remains that in this debate they are without rights and therefore powerless. Indeed the only power with which we are prepared to invest our children is the power to nag relentlessly, a force against which adults are for once powerless. At the same time however, children are quietly getting on with their television consumption, often watching programmes made for adults rather than the programming made specifically for them. Ironically a significant casualty of these power struggles is likely to be children's television itself – the funds for which have been decimated by the UK's ban on junk food advertising. In the meantime, children continue to vote with the remote and adults continue to lobby ACMA.

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