

Children and media: a cultural studies approach¹

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Abstract

Defying the traditional psychology understanding on what are the effects of the media and also the researches made on the subject, the present article offers an approach to the study of the relationship between children and the media, focusing mainly on television. We retrace the Cultural Studies perspective, although the researches from the Birmingham Centre have not worked over such age group. The work includes the model of the cultural circuit, it refuses to understand meaning as something that the media distributes to a passive audience and it states that the audience has an active role but works under conditions strange to its own choice. Regarding children, their relationship with the media is structured and restrained by broader social discourses and institutions that try to define childhood in some given ways.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, children, television, cultural circuit, meanings

What is Cultural Studies?

Attempting to define Cultural Studies is a task that is fraught with difficulties (cf. Storey, 1996). It invokes claims and counter-claims for disciplinary territory of the kind that often preoccupy academics – yet which must appear to the wider world rather like debates about the precise number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin. In this chapter, I provide a personal perspective on the contribution of Cultural Studies to analysing children’s relationships with media. I outline a simple theoretical model, review a range of relevant research, and then describe a particular research project of my own that sought to apply this model in practice. I make no claim to be definitive: this will be a Cultural Studies approach, rather than the approach.

The history of what is now commonly termed ‘British’ Cultural Studies has been well documented, and does not need to be rehearsed in any detail here (see, among many others, Tudor, 1999; Turner, 2002). The origins of Cultural Studies lie in the study of English literature, and its encounter with the emergent discipline of sociology. The work of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart in the late 1950s represented a

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significant challenge to the elitism of traditional literary criticism: in different ways, both argued for a broadening of the concept of ‘culture’, and for the need to study, not simply the received canon of literary texts, but a much broader range of cultural practices (Hoggart, 1959; Williams 1958, 1961). Hoggart went on to establish the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, which became the key institution in the field, particularly under its subsequent director, Stuart Hall. The Birmingham Centre was the focus both for sustained empirical work on aspects of popular culture (most notably on youth culture) and for a critical engagement with major theoretical developments, particularly in Marxist and post-Marxist theories of ideology. During the late 1970s and 1980s, it struggled to accommodate new challenges deriving from feminism and anti-racism, as well as responding to contrary theoretical tendencies, for example in the emergence of psychoanalytically-informed ‘Screen theory’.

Broadly speaking, Cultural Studies is defined by its concern with the relationships between particular cultural practices and broader processes of social power. It looks at how cultural meanings and pleasures are produced and circulated within society; how individuals and social groups use and interpret cultural texts; and the role of cultural practices in the construction of people’s social identities. In this sense, Cultural Studies is primarily concerned with the political dimensions of cultural practice; and it has paid particular attention to the ways in which power relationships – for example, based around social class, gender and ‘race’ – are reproduced, resisted and negotiated through acts of cultural production and reception (key early texts here would include CCCS, 1982; CCCS Women’s Studies Group, 1978; Hall et al., 1979, 1980).

‘Media’ – in the sense of ‘mass’ media such as television, film, advertising and the press – are thus only one element of the broader field of Cultural Studies. Some of the more ethnographic work undertaken here has looked in a more holistic way at social and cultural practices – for example, those of youth ‘subcultures’ - of which the use and interpretation of media form only a part. Nevertheless, there is a strong tradition of empirical research on media within the Cultural Studies tradition, which incorporates the analysis of media texts alongside the study of audiences. Such work is typically

qualitative, and in the case of audience research there is a strong emphasis on analysing the ways in which different social groups talk about what they watch and read (key early examples of such work would include Ang, 1985; Hobson, 1982; and Morley, 1980).

In terms of our focus here, it is worth noting that children were almost entirely absent from the empirical research conducted at Birmingham. Social class, gender and ‘race’ were key concerns; but age, as an equally significant dimension of social power, was strangely neglected. However, there was a strong focus on aspects of youth culture (e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; MacRobbie, 1991; Willis, 1990); and while this work has subsequently been challenged on several grounds (e.g. Bennett, 2000), it remains a basic point of departure for a great deal of contemporary research in this field. Significantly, the Birmingham researchers regarded ‘youth’ as a category that was cut across by other social differences, particularly class and gender; and while this work sometimes tended to romanticise forms of youth cultural ‘resistance’, it should caution us against essentialised conceptions of youth - or indeed of childhood.

The ‘Birmingham tradition’ occupies a near-mythical status in accounts of Cultural Studies; but most acknowledge that the discipline (if such it is) has become significantly more dispersed and heterogeneous over the past twenty years. The 1990s saw the growing institutionalisation of Cultural Studies, particularly in the United States, via the establishment of degree programmes, scholarly journals, publishers’ lists, conferences and academic associations (Hall, 1992). European Cultural Studies has also expanded via the delineation of nationally-focused traditions (e.g. Forbes and Kelly, 1995; Jordon and Morgan-Tamosunas, 2000; Phipps, 2000); and there has been a growing international dialogue, with the emergence of regional variants such as Latin American and Asian Cultural Studies, and powerful calls for the ‘de-Westernising’ of the field (e.g. Curran and Park, 2000).

In many respects, this has been a success story, although there are some who still pine for the days when Cultural Studies saw itself as a form of political activism, waging war on the academic establishment. Even so, the institutionalisation of Cultural Studies does not appear to have resulted in greater coherence about its fundamental

aims and methods. Perhaps the most damaging development, in my view, is the tendency for Cultural Studies to be seen as synonymous with Cultural Theory, and for the strongly empirical emphasis associated with the Birmingham tradition to be dissipated. Yet despite these developments, it is still relatively straightforward to differentiate Cultural Studies from what it is not.

Research on children and media, particularly in the United States, continues to be dominated by conventional approaches drawn from developmental psychology, social psychology and communication studies. Exponents of these approaches typically ignore or denigrate Cultural Studies, while also taking little account of innovative theoretical developments within their own disciplines (for example, Singer and Singer, 2002). Cultural Studies presents several fundamental challenges to this ‘business as usual’ approach. Epistemologically, it questions positivist and empiricist approaches, for example as embodied in conventional forms of media content analysis: it does not assume that meaning is self-evident or immanent in media texts, or that it is simply transmitted or delivered to readers. It disputes normative models of child development, focusing attention instead on the changing social, historical and cultural construction of childhood. It seeks to understand children’s media practices in their own terms and from their own perspectives, rather than comparing them with those of adults; and it seeks to explore the social experiences of children, not least as these are constructed through the operation of other dimensions of social power, such as social class, gender and ethnicity. In these respects, Cultural Studies approaches to children and media draw on recent work within the sociology of childhood (see Prout, this volume), on critical psychology and (more broadly) on forms of poststructuralist theory.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this difference is in the debate about the effects of media violence. While most mainstream psychologists (at least in the United States) tend to proclaim that there is academic consensus about this issue, Cultural Studies researchers have directly and persistently challenged the basic theoretical and methodological assumptions of effects research (see, among others, Barker and Petley, 2001). These critics dispute the reliability of laboratory experiments as a guide to real-life behaviour; they challenge the use of correlational surveys as a means of proving

causal connections between media use and behaviour; they argue that effects researchers typically define ‘violence’ in inconsistent and simplistic ways; and they claim that notions of causal ‘effect’ are a highly inadequate way of conceiving of the relationships between media and their audiences. From a Cultural Studies perspective, effects research is seen to operate with a naïve and inadequate theory of meaning; and it largely denies the agency of audiences as active makers of meaning, rather than merely as recipients of pre-defined ‘messages’ (Barker, 2001). However, this dispute also has a political dimension: Cultural Studies academics argue that the construction of ‘media violence’ as a social problem effectively permits politicians to avoid addressing more fundamental causes of violent crime, such as the easy availability of lethal weapons – and that effects researchers are largely colluding in this process. This sustained deconstruction of the discourses of ‘media effects’ is, for the most part, simply ignored by mainstream researchers. However, some critics of Cultural Studies (such as Kline, 2003, and Kubey, 1996) have attempted to strike back: they accuse Cultural Studies of pretending that media have no effects whatsoever, or of claiming that such effects are merely benign – a charge that can only be described as an absurd misrepresentation.

While by no means wishing to defend everything that purports to be Cultural Studies, I would argue that it offers a distinctive set of theories, and a methodological orientation towards the study of children and media that is very different from that of mainstream disciplines, particularly psychology. The central emphasis here is not on the effects of the media on behaviour or attitudes, but on the ways in which meanings are established, negotiated and circulated. The media are not seen merely as vehicles for delivering ‘messages’ to passive audiences; nor is the emphasis simply on the isolated encounter between mind and screen. On the contrary, this research regards children’s uses and interpretations of the media as inherently social processes; and it understands these processes to be characterised by forms of power and difference. The ‘child’ is not primarily seen here in developmental terms, as a category defined merely by age. On the contrary, there is an emphasis on the diversity of childhoods (in the plural), not least in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity. From this perspective, what it means to be a child is not something fixed or given, but something that is socially constructed and

negotiated.

A Cultural Studies approach

The Cultural Studies approach I propose in this chapter is in some respects a traditional one. It derives partly from a seminal article published more than 20 years ago by Richard Johnson, subsequently Director of the Birmingham Centre (Johnson, 1985/1996). Johnson outlines a circular model of cultural analysis with four key dimensions. I have simplified this in my naïve model to three (see Figure 2).

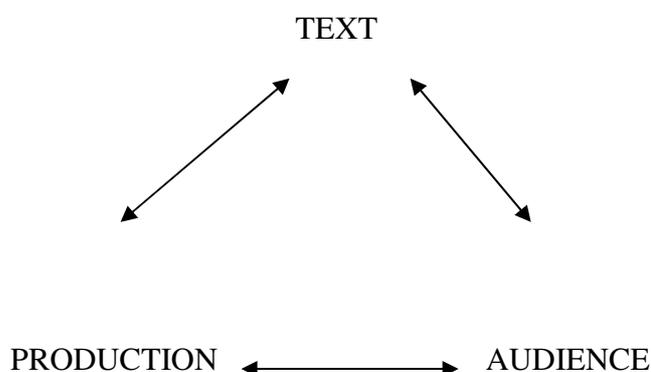


Figure 2: Cultural Studies: a 'naïve' theoretical model

In his article, Johnson makes an important case for the multi-dimensional nature of cultural analysis. He argues that culture is a social process, and that we can identify a series of 'moments' in that process which can usefully be isolated for analysis. The moment of production is that in which cultural objects or texts are brought into being; these texts take specific forms, that can be analysed in their own right; the meanings of these texts are then actualised in the moment of reading; and readings subsequently feed into what Johnson terms lived cultures, which then in turn impact back on the process of production.

Social conditions and relations impinge on this process at each point. For example, production is not seen here merely as an individual 'creative' activity, but as one that is subject to specific institutional, social and economic conditions. Likewise,

reading is not seen as a self-contained encounter between the individual reader and the text: on the contrary, it too occurs in a particular social context, which partly influences which readings are likely to be made. These broader social conditions do not wholly determine particular acts of production or of reading: however, they do set constraints and create possibilities which systematically favour the generation of particular meanings rather than others.

How is this model any different from the well-known ‘sender-message-receiver’ model of communication first proposed by Shannon and Weaver (1949)? The crux, in my view, is that it is a dynamic model. In Johnson’s diagram, the arrows flow in a circuit, linking each of the four elements in turn; while in my triangle, each element connects reciprocally with the other. Theoretically, this implies that none of the moments in the process should necessarily be privileged. Meaning does not flow in one direction, from sender to receiver; and the power to determine meaning does not lie at any one of these points, but in the relationships between them. In my simplified model, the bi-directional arrows imply that the relations between audiences, texts and producers are mutually determining. Texts do not simply ‘contain’ meanings that they impose on readers, any more than readers make of them any meaning they happen to wish. Likewise, producers may ‘target’ audiences – or seek to construct and define them in particular ways – but audiences also ‘speak back’ to producers, and their behaviour constrains what it is possible for producers to do or achieve. Finally, producers do not simply insert meanings into texts: textual forms and genres exert their own constraints on what it is possible to say, and what is ultimately ‘said’ may not correspond to what producers consciously intend.

Johnson argues that each of these moments in the process is deserving of a specific form of analysis; but that none of them is necessarily determining of any of the others, and that there are risks in taking each of them in isolation. Focusing solely on production, for example, may lead us to overestimate the power of the producers – for example, of the large corporations that typically dominate the media market. Focusing exclusively on texts can result in one of the familiar fallacies of textual analysis: that the critic’s interpretation necessarily tells us how the text will be read (and, indeed, the

effects it may have on its readers). Focusing only on the moment of reading can result in a romanticised celebration of the power and activity of the reader – as though the meaning of any text were simply determined by the reader. Likewise, focusing solely on ‘lived cultures’ can lead us to place too great an emphasis on individual agency, and to neglect the ways in which everyday experiences are shaped by wider social forces. The history of media research in Cultural Studies is replete with examples of such fallacious assumptions; and part of the purpose in returning to this early account is that it provides some way of overcoming the internal disputes that have characterised the field.

Richard Johnson’s basic model has been challenged and refined in various ways in recent years. For example, the Open University’s Cultural Studies undergraduate course (partly led by Stuart Hall) is based on a five-point ‘star’, whose elements are defined more conceptually (these elements are: production, regulation, representation, consumption and identity). In practice, however, I would argue that the instances or ‘moments’ of analysis in the course itself are still very close to those proposed in Johnson’s original model (see du Gay et al., 1997). More recently, Nick Couldry (2004) has proposed a ‘new paradigm’ in media research, based on an account of ‘media as practice’. He argues that this approach will ‘decentre’ media research from its preoccupation with texts and production, and redirect it towards ‘the study of the open-ended range of practices directly or indirectly focused on media’ (117). In some respects, Couldry seems to be calling for renewed attention to the elements that Johnson refers to as ‘lived cultures’ – in other words, for a more ‘anthropological’ attention to the diverse range of ‘media-oriented practices’ that go beyond those in which people are explicitly constituted (or constitute themselves) as an ‘audience’.

These reformulations are certainly useful, although they beg broader questions that cannot be explored in detail here. Ultimately, I would argue that conceiving of production, text and reading as ‘moments’ in a broader ongoing process is not necessarily incompatible with the reformulation Couldry is proposing. The ‘moment’ of reading, for example, should not be understood simply as a matter of the isolated encounter between the reader and the text: this encounter takes place in specific social settings, in the context of various social and institutional relationships, and forms part of

a history of other encounters with other texts. While the text itself may appear as a fixed object, it is surrounded by other texts to which it relates and refers, and which in turn form part of the ‘symbolic resources’ readers use to make sense of it. Likewise, the ‘moment’ of production is of course also much more than a moment: it is often a collaborative process that evolves over time, within specific institutional and political settings. Analytically, it may be necessary to isolate ‘moments’ for analysis, but these moments are always inevitably part of a broader social and cultural practice.

The attentive reader will no doubt have recognised that the dimension of ‘lived culture’ from Johnson’s model is effectively missing from my own. This is not because of any desire to avoid the messy realities of everyday experience; it merely reflects a desire to delimit the boundaries of media research, as distinct from a more broad-ranging and inclusive anthropology of everyday life (or ‘culture’). Focusing on the audience as a ‘moment’ in this broader practice implies that media research needs to concentrate primarily on the points at which people come to be constituted (or to constitute themselves) as audiences – as readers or users of particular media. Of course, people are never only audiences; and ‘audiencing’ (being a member of an audience) is merely a part of their broader social experience. Yet, while acknowledging that our behaviour as members of (multiple) audiences is necessarily situated in this wider context, analysing the specific place of media in that context simply means that we have to draw a line at some point.

Cultural Studies, children and media: a brief review

Over the past two decades, childhood has gradually emerged as a focus of concern in academic Media and Cultural Studies – although it still remains fairly marginal to the field, at least in English-speaking countries. The following brief review draws attention to some of the more significant studies relating to children and media in each of the three areas identified on my triangular model. Inevitably, much of this work focuses on television – which is also my primary concern in this chapter – although

there is a growing concern with new media such as the internet and computer games.

Production

Critical academic studies of media production for children are relatively few and far between. Early studies of children's television such as those by Melody (1973) and Turow (1981) adopted a broad 'political economy' approach, focusing on questions of ownership, marketing and regulation. Aside from the work of Buckingham et al. (1999) and Hendershot (2004a), there has been very little analysis of producers' assumptions and expectations about the child audience; and while there has been some historical and international comparative research on the evolution of regulatory policy on children's television (e.g. Hendershot, 1998; Keys and Buckingham, 1999; Lisosky, 2001), this too has remained under-researched. Even in the case of cinema, historical research has been relatively under-developed, although there are important studies relating specifically to cinema exhibition and distribution (Staples, 1997) and to questions of censorship (Kuhn, 2002; Smith, 2005).

Perhaps the most interesting work in this field in recent years has related to broader concerns about the commercialisation of children's culture (see Wasko, this volume). This issue has generated a growing body of popular commentary (e.g. Linn, 2004); and while much of this has been driven by a view of children as especially vulnerable to influence and exploitation, it has also shed light on the increasingly sophisticated and often 'invisible' practices of children's marketers. There have also been some important historical studies of marketing to children, for example of goods such as clothing (Cook, 2004) and toys (Cross, 1997), and of marketing practices more broadly (Cross, 2004; Seiter, 1993). While advocates of a traditional 'political economy' approach tend to regard the market as inherently inimical to children's best interests (e.g. Kline, 1993), others have adopted a more sanguine approach, arguing that critiques of consumer culture are often driven by implicitly elitist conceptions of taste and cultural value (Seiter, 1993). Our own research on the political economy of children's television (Buckingham et al., 1999) and of 'edutainment' media (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2005) also suggests that success in the marketplace is far from secure or

guaranteed, and that producers often face considerable challenges in identifying children's wants and needs in the first place.

Texts

Of course, children's use of media is far from confined to material that is specifically designed for them; yet the analysis of children's media provides interesting insights into some of the broader tensions that surround dominant definitions of childhood. For example, research on children's television has focused on well-established concerns such as gender representation (Seiter, 1993; Griffiths, 2002), as well as more novel issues such as its implicit models of adult citizenship (Northam, 2005), how it handles the relationship between 'information' and 'entertainment' (Buckingham, 1995), and how it addresses the child viewer (Davies, 1995). There have also been fruitful discussions of specific genres of children's programming such as costume drama (Davies, 2002), news (Buckingham, 2000), action-adventure shows (Jenkins, 1999) and pre-school programming (Oswell, 2002). Likewise, in relation to film, there have been important studies of the ways in which contemporary 'family films' are seeking to redefine (if only superficially) the relationships between adults and children (Allen, 1999; Morris, 2000). As in research on children's literature, the analysis suggests that the position of the medium as a 'parent' or 'teacher' and the process of attempting to 'draw in' the child are fraught with difficulties and uncertainties (cf. Rose, 1984).

Some of the most interesting work in this area has focused on the widely denigrated area of children's cartoons. As against the continuing use of quantitative content analysis (e.g. Kline, 1995), there have been several studies that have applied semiotics (Hodge and Tripp, 1986), psychoanalysis (Urwin, 1995) and postmodernist theory (Kinder, 1991) in qualitative analyses of this apparently simple genre. This work raises interesting hypotheses about the ways in which cartoons offer the potential for 'subversive' readings, and enable viewers to explore and manage anxiety, thereby perhaps bringing about more protean forms of subjectivity (Hendershot, 2004b; Wells, 2002). Disney has proved a particularly fertile ground for textual studies, generating competing analyses informed by a range of theoretical perspectives including feminism

(Bell, 1995), poststructuralism (McQuillan and Byrne, 1999) and more conventional forms of ideological critique (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975).

More recently, analyses of new media have also begun to address texts specifically targeted at children. There have been several productive studies looking at specific genres of computer games (Carr et al., 2006; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000), entertainment websites for children (Seiter, 2005), 'edutainment' games and websites (Buckingham and Scanlon, 2003, 2004) and the interface between games and more traditional forms of children's media such as books (Burn, in press).

Audiences

It is in the area of audience research that Cultural Studies researchers have made the most significant contribution to this field; and several of the other chapters in this volume illustrate this in different ways. As I have suggested, Cultural Studies challenges the positivist epistemology of mainstream psychology, as well as seeking to develop a more fully social account of the child audience. Its primary emphasis in terms of audience research is in understanding the social processes through which the meanings and pleasures of media are constructed, defined and circulated. While Cultural Studies research is not necessarily qualitative (see Murdock, 1997), it often relies either on focus-group or individual interviews or on 'ethnographic' observation.

In their ground-breaking study, Hodge and Tripp (1986) applied a social semiotic perspective, both to the analysis of children's programming, and to audience talk. Although they regard children as 'active' producers of meaning, they are also concerned with the ideological and formal constraints exerted by the text. In the process, they explore how children's talk about television depends upon the context in which it occurs, and how it enacts social relationships with others (including researchers themselves). This approach has been pursued in my own work, where there is a central emphasis on the ways in which children define and construct their social identities through talk about television and other media (Buckingham, 1993a, b; 1996; 2000; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). Rather than applying a narrowly semiotic approach, this research uses arguments drawn from discourse analysis to challenge the positivist use of

audience data within mainstream research: rather than regarding what children say at face value, as some kind of self-evident reflection of what they 'really' think or believe, it argues that talk should itself be seen as a form of social action or performance (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Children's judgments about genre and representation, and their reconstructions of television narrative, for example, are studied as inherently social processes; and the development of knowledge about television ('television literacy') and of a 'critical' perspective are seen in terms of their social motivations and purposes. In parallel with this work, some researchers have adopted a more 'ethnographic' approach to studying children's uses of media, based primarily on observation. Thus, there have been studies of the use of television and other media, both within the home (e.g. Palmer, 1986; Richards, 1993) and in the context of the peer group (Sefton-Green, 1998; Wood, 1993); as well as studies of children's engagement with new media such as computer games (Schott and Horrell, 2000) and the internet (Davies, in press; Beavis et al., 2005). Several studies have observed the use of media in schools and informal educational settings, mainly in the context of media education programmes (e.g. Bragg, 2000; Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1994; Buckingham et al., 1995; Burn, 2000; Marsh, 1999; Richards, 1998). However, the term 'ethnographic' is perhaps best reserved for studies that have entailed long-term immersion in a particular community; and work of this kind is comparatively rare in media research more broadly. Marie Gillespie's (1995) study of the use of television among a South Asian community in London is a rare exception, which combines an analysis of the role of television within the family and the peer group with an account of children's responses to specific genres such as news and soap opera.

While this is a developing body of research, there are several broader issues within it that remain to be resolved. Like sociologists of childhood, Cultural Studies researchers are broadly inclined to regard children as 'active' participants in the process of making meaning - as competent social actors, rather than as passive and incompetent victims. This kind of argument offers an important challenge to many of the assumptions that typically circulate in public debate - particularly in arguments about media violence. Yet there is a risk of adopting a rather simplistic 'child-centred'

approach, which seeks to celebrate the sophistication of the ‘media-wise’ child, and to prove (endlessly) that children are not as gullible or as passive as they are made out to be. There is often an implicit assumption that if children are ‘active’, then they are somehow not going to be influenced by what they watch. Yet this does not necessarily follow: indeed, one could argue that in some instances to be ‘active’ is to be more open to influence – and ‘activity’ should not in itself be equated with agency, or with social power. Furthermore, this kind of celebration of children's sophistication as users of media can lead us to neglect the fact that there are areas they need to know more about – which is inevitably a key concern both for educators and for media regulators.

This reflects a broader tension here between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ that is characteristic of the human sciences in general (see Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004). The temptation to celebrate children’s agency – and, in doing so, to speak ‘on behalf of the child’ – can lead researchers to neglect the broader economic, social and political forces that both constrain and produce particular forms of audience behaviour or meaning-making. The intellectual, cultural and indeed material resources that children use in making meaning are not equally available to all. The actions of media producers and the structures and forms of media texts clearly delimit and to some extent determine the possible meanings that can be made. From the perspective of ‘structuration theory’ (Giddens, 1984), we would argue that structure works through agency, and agency works through structure: in order to create meanings and pleasures, the media depend upon the active agency of audiences; and yet (to paraphrase another well-known commentator) audiences can only make meanings in conditions that are not of their own choosing.

This is why, in my view, it remains crucially important for researchers to combine the different areas of investigation identified here. Yet while there have been significant contributions in each of these areas, there have been comparatively few attempts to bring them together, or to theorise the relationships between them. Janet Wasko’s studies of Disney (Wasko, 2000; Wasko et al, 2001) do address the economic, textual and audience dimensions of the phenomenon, and look across a range of media; while Stephen Kline et al. (2003) provide a similarly multidimensional analysis of video

games, albeit one that is significantly more effective in its analysis of the industry than in accounting for other aspects. Yet while both studies cover the relevant bases, neither offers a convincing theoretical reconciliation of the different perspectives. However, Joseph Tobin's edited volume on the Pokemon phenomenon manages to combine these elements more effectively (Tobin, 2004a): the contributions by Tobin (2004b) and by the present author (Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2004) seek to move beyond polarised accounts of the operation of 'media power', combining each of the three aspects identified above. As we suggest, this is not simply a matter of balancing the equation, and thereby finding a happy medium between the 'power of the text' and the 'power of the audience'. Nor is it something that can be achieved in the abstract. Ultimately, the relationship between children and the media can only be fully understood in the context of a wider analysis of the ways in which both are constructed and defined.

Re-locating the child audience

In the final part of this chapter, I would like to provide a brief outline of a research project I undertook some years ago that tried to develop these connections. The project focused primarily on children's television, and how children themselves use and interpret it. (Further information about this research can be found in Buckingham, 2002a; Buckingham et al., 1999; Davies et al., 1999, 2000; Kelley et al., 2000).

Our starting point here was to question the category of 'the child' and particularly 'the child audience'. We wanted to make explicit and to deconstruct the assumptions that are made about children - about who children are, about what they need, and about what they should and should not see. These assumptions derive in turn from a whole range of moral, political, economic, psychological and educational theories. Our basic research question, therefore, was: how do the media (particularly television) construct the child audience? And how do children negotiate with these constructions - how do they define themselves and their needs as an audience? We also wanted to consider how those definitions and constructions have changed historically -

and how they do or do not reflect changing social constructions of childhood more broadly.

The key point in terms of my argument here is that these questions cannot be answered by looking at only one aspect of the picture - for example, just by looking at television itself, or just by looking at the audience. On the contrary, we need to understand the relationships between producers, texts and audiences. We need to analyse how these different assumptions about children circulate and are manifested at different levels - in policy, in production, in regulation, in the practice of research, in scheduling, in choices about content, in textual form, in children's own perspectives on and uses of media, and in how those uses are regulated and mediated within the home. It is vital to emphasise that none of these levels is determining: on the contrary, there is an ongoing struggle over meaning. Texts position readers; but readers also make meanings from texts. Media institutions create policies that are manifested in texts; but policies are not simply implemented, since producers exercise their own kinds of creativity and professional judgment. Likewise, media producers imagine and target audiences; but audiences are elusive - and the changing behaviour of audiences in turn produces changes in the practices of media institutions.

Furthermore, all these relationships evolve over time: policies and institutions evolve historically, in response to other forces; texts also bear histories of intertextual or generic relations with other texts, which themselves are subject to change; and readers do not come to texts either as blank slates or as wised-up critical viewers - they also have reading histories, histories of engagements with other texts, which have enabled them to develop certain kinds of competencies as readers.

Changing constructions of childhood: production, text and audience

In terms of production, our research explored three main areas. We looked historically at the evolution of children's television, and the kinds of institutional struggles that went on in attempting to claim and preserve a specific place for children in the schedules; we explored the contemporary political economy of children's

television, and the fate of public service television in the light of the move towards a more commercial, multi-channel, global system; and we gathered and analysed instances of policy discourse, in the form of official reports and interviews with policy-makers, broadcasters, regulators, lobbyists and others (see Buckingham et al., 1999).

In very broad terms, what we find here is a complex balance between the fear of doing harm (a protectionist discourse) and the attempt to do children good (a pedagogical discourse); and these are discourses that in each case draw on broader discourses about childhood. There are also, obviously, some significant historical shifts, as established traditions and philosophies come under pressure in the changing media environment. At present, for example, older philosophies of child-centredness, which were very dominant in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, are being rearticulated through their encounter with more consumerist notions of childhood, and with notions of children's rights.

Yet far from enjoying an absolute power to define the child audience, producers and policy-makers in fact display a considerable degree of uncertainty about it. Changing social and economic conditions often appear to have precipitated a much broader set of doubts about the changing nature of childhood. In the 1950s, for instance, the advent of commercial television, and the subsequent dramatic decline in the ratings of the BBC (the public service channel), led to a thoroughgoing process of soul-searching. Those responsible for children's programmes at the BBC were dismayed by their loss of the child audience, and increasingly came to doubt the somewhat middle-class, paternalistic approach they had been adopting. Ultimately, after a period of internal crisis, the BBC's Children's Department was abolished in the early 1960s: it was subsumed by a new Family Department, and when it re-emerged later in the decade, it did so with a much less paternalistic view of its audience.

Similar doubts and uncertainties are apparent in the present situation, as terrestrial broadcasters try to come to terms with the threat of competition from new cable and satellite providers, and (more broadly) with the challenges of globalisation and commercialisation. Since the late 1990s, children in Britain (or at least those whose parents subscribe to pay-TV) have gained access to a vast range of new specialist channels (there are 22 at the time of writing in 2005); and while the generic range of

new programming is comparatively narrow, much of it appears distinctly fresh and innovative, and there is a great deal more for children to choose from.

Contrasting the publicity material produced by the BBC with that produced by the US-based specialist channel Nickelodeon provides a symptomatic indication of the different definitions of childhood that are at stake here (see Buckingham, 2002c). The BBC still tends to hark back to the past, invoking (or indeed re-inventing) tradition - and in the process, playing to parents' nostalgia for the television of their own childhoods. By contrast, Nickelodeon does not have to achieve legitimacy with parents (and hence secure their continued assent for the compulsory licence fee): it can address children directly, and it does so in ways that emphasise their anarchic humour and their sensuality. What we find here, and in the statements of its executives (e.g. Laybourne, 1993), is a rhetoric of empowerment - a notion of the channel as giving voice to kids, taking the kids' point of view, as the friend of kids. This is typically aligned with a form of 'anti-adultism', which defines adults as necessarily boring and conservative. This is a very powerful rhetoric, albeit one that could be accused of disguising its fundamental commercialism under a superficial affectation of 'children's rights'.

In terms of texts, we were interested in how these assumptions and ideologies of childhood are manifested or negotiated in the practices of producers, and in the form of texts themselves. There were two aspects to our research here. Firstly, we tried to develop a broad view of the range of material that has been offered to children over time, through an audit both of the children's television schedules over the past four decades and of the programmes that are most popular with children. The schedules for children's TV in the 1950s embody a very different construction of the space of childhood, and of the nature of children's viewing, compared with the diversity of material that is on offer today; and they implicitly propose a very different phenomenology of the viewing experience itself (cf. Lury, 2002). Our analysis questions some of the myths of cultural decline that often characterise discussions of children's television: the notion that we once lived in a kind of golden age of quality, and that we are now being swamped by trashy American programming, simply does not hold up in the face of the evidence.

Secondly, we undertook a series of qualitative case studies of particular texts or genres, as well as talking to their producers. We were particularly interested in texts or areas of programming that have a long history, where we can see clear indications of historical change. We looked at how texts address and construct the child viewer - for example, the various ways in which the viewer is spoken to; how the viewer is or is not invited to be involved; the function of children as actors or participants within the programmes; how adult/child relations are represented or enacted; and more formal devices - how the visual design of the studio, the camerawork, graphics and music imply assumptions about who children are, and what they are (or should be) interested in. This analysis is also, of course, about content - about which topics are seen to be appropriate for this audience, and how the perceived interests of the child audience are demarcated from or overlap with those of the adult audience.

The BBC preschool series Teletubbies, and the debates that surrounded it, provide an interesting case study of some of these changes (see Buckingham, 2002b). Teletubbies, which began broadcasting in 1997, combines elements that are very familiar in programmes for younger children, such as songs, dances and playful sketches, with more innovative components, such as short documentary sequences narrated from the child's viewpoint. The overall scenario of the programme – which features four brightly-coloured creatures resembling babies in diapers, who live in an underground science-fiction bunker – is, to say the least, somewhat quirky and surreal. Teletubbies is an outsourced, independent production, which has generated strong overseas sales and a vast range of ancillary merchandising. It has been accused by critics of abandoning the 'great tradition' of educative programming, and thereby 'dumbing down' its audience; of commercially exploiting children; and (by some overseas critics) of cultural imperialism, in terms of pedagogy and social representation. The controversy it has aroused can be seen as a highly symptomatic reflection of the BBC's current dilemmas, as it attempts to sustain national public service traditions while simultaneously depending on commercial activities and global sales.

In terms of both form and content, Teletubbies is an amalgam of two historical traditions within British preschool children's television – the more didactic (albeit play-

oriented), ‘realist’, adult-centred approach of Playdays and its predecessor Playschool on the one hand, and the more surrealistic, entertaining tradition of many animation and puppet shows on the other. While it is the latter that immediately confounds and surprises many adult critics, it is important to recognise the particular forms of education that are being offered here, and the different ways in which they construct the child viewer. Thus, the ‘child-centred’ pedagogic approach is manifested in documentary inserts shot and narrated from the child’s point of view; in the manipulation of knowledge via narrative; and in the slow pace and ‘parental’ mode of address. This contrasts with the more didactic elements, relating to pre-reading and counting skills and the modelling of daily routines.

Teletubbies almost instantly became extremely popular with its immediate target audience of 1-3-year-olds; but it also briefly attained a kind of cult status among older children and among some adults. The programme was a frequent topic of conversation in our audience research, although our sample was much older than the target audience. The 6-7-year-olds were often keen to disavow any interest in the programme, while the 10-11-year-olds seemed to relate to it with a kind of subversive irony - although it was often passionately rejected by those with younger siblings. As this implies, the children’s judgments about the programme reflected their attempts to project themselves as more or less ‘adult’. Combined with more anecdotal information about the programme’s popularity with older children and young adults, this suggests that its (passing) cult popularity may have been symptomatic of a broader sense of irony that suffuses contemporary television culture – and one that often reflects ambivalent investments in the idea of ‘childishness’.

What we find at the level of institutions and texts, then, are some very powerful definitions of the child - definitions which are partly coercive, but also partly very pleasurable, and often quite awkward and contradictory. The obvious question here is how children negotiate with these definitions: that is, how they define themselves as an audience. This was the third dimension of the project, and again there was a quantitative and a qualitative dimension.

Audience ratings can clearly tell us a fair amount about how children define

themselves as an audience; and however unreliable or superficial they may be, they clearly show (for example) that children are increasingly opting to watch adult programmes and not children's programmes. At the same time, children do choose to watch particular kinds of adult programmes; and it is interesting to look at the versions or aspects of 'adulthood' that they choose to buy into, and those they reject or resist.

These kinds of questions were the focus of our more qualitative investigations of the child audience, which focused on children aged 6-7 and 10-11. Through a series of focus group discussions and activities, we investigated how children negotiate with these adult definitions of childhood, how they define themselves as children, and as children of a particular age - and how they do this in different ways in different contexts and for different purposes.

In the children's exploration of what makes a programme 'appropriate' for children, the strongest arguments were negative ones. Programmes featuring sex, violence and 'swearing' were singled out by both groups as being particularly 'grown-up'. Likewise, children's programmes were predominantly defined in terms of absences - that is, in terms of what they do not include. One area of our analysis here concerned children's discussions of sex and sexuality on television. On one level, it was clear that 'adult' material on television could function as a kind of 'forbidden fruit'. In discussing this kind of material, the children displayed a complex mixture of embarrassment, bravado and moral disapproval. Discussions of sex and romance in genres such as dating game shows, soap operas and sitcoms often served as a rehearsal of projected future (hetero-)sexual identities, particularly among girls. Boys were less comfortable here, with the younger ones more inclined to display disgust than fascination; although the older ones were more voyeuristic.

The children were very familiar with adult definitions of appropriateness, although they were inclined to displace any negative 'effects' of television onto those younger than themselves, or onto 'children' in general. While some of the youngest children expressed a more censorious rejection of 'adult' material, this was much less common among the older children, who aspired to the freedom they associated with the category of the 'teenager'; and these discussions could serve as a form of mutual

policing, particularly among boys. Overall, the analysis here suggests that in discussing their responses to television, children are performing a kind of ‘identity work’, particularly via claims about their own ‘maturity’. In the process, these discussions serve largely to reinforce normative definitions both of ‘childhood’ and of gender identity (see Kelley et al., 2000; and for subsequent research on this issue, Buckingham and Bragg, 2004).

Another aspect of our investigation here concerned the issue of children’s tastes. We were interested to discover whether children have distinctive tastes as an audience, and how these tastes are articulated and negotiated in the context of peer group discussion. We analysed the social functions and characteristics of children’s expressions of their tastes using a set of overlapping paradigmatic oppositions which emerged from their attempts to categorise programmes: parents/children; grannies/teenagers; boring/funny; and talk/action. In each case, the children generally favoured the latter element (associated with children) and disavowed the former (associated with adults). However, they frequently distinguished here between the tastes attributed to parents in general and those they observed in the case of their own parents – again suggesting a recognition that broad discursive categories may not always be directly applicable in everyday life. The older children were inclined to aspire to the identity of the ‘teenager’, via the display of particular tastes, notably in comedy. By contrast, the tastes of some adults were dismissed as belonging to the category of ‘grannies’, who were parodied as hopelessly ‘old fashioned’ and ‘uncool’. The children were highly dismissive of programmes featuring ‘talk’ and enthusiastic about those featuring action – not least action of a violent or otherwise spectacular nature. As this implies, they frequently inverted cultural hierarchies and resisted adult notions of ‘good taste’.

Contemporary debates about children’s television have emphasised the need for factual programmes, literary adaptations and socially responsible contemporary drama. Without disputing this, our analysis suggests that there is also a need for entertainment programming – and indeed for programmes that a majority of adults would consider ‘infantile’, ‘puerile’ or otherwise ‘in bad taste’. The complex and playful nature of

children's judgments of taste, and their understanding of taste as 'cultural capital', is certainly apparent in the popularity of such self-consciously ironic and 'tasteless' texts as South Park and Beavis and Butthead. Nevertheless, children's tastes cannot be defined in an essentialist way, any more than adults' can: both groups are more heterogeneous than is typically assumed (see Davies et al., 2000).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have proposed a particular approach to studying children and media that is squarely located within the tradition of Cultural Studies. It is an approach that directly challenges the positivist assumptions of mainstream psychology and of media effects research. Rather than seeing meaning as something that the media simply deliver to passive audiences, it focuses on the diverse ways in which meanings and pleasures are constructed, defined and circulated. It begins from the assumption that audiences are indeed 'active', but that they act under conditions that are not of their own choosing – and to this extent, it challenges the tendency to equate 'activity' with agency or power. In the case of children, their relationships with media are structured and constrained by wider social institutions and discourses, which (among other things) seek to define 'childhood' in particular ways. The child audience – or at least the specific characteristics of that audience – are thus constructed through an ongoing process of social negotiation.

Of course, there is a great deal that is not included within this account. The primary focus of the research I have described has been on television; and while I have referred to some research on other media, there is a great deal more that might be said, particularly about the ways in which Cultural Studies might contribute to an analysis of 'new' media such as the internet and computer games (see Buckingham, 2005). I am also very conscious that my account has been 'Anglo-centric', and I have been unable to take full account of the contributions to Cultural Studies emerging from non-English-speaking countries – although I am confident that this absence will be made good by my fellow contributors to this volume.

The crucial question that remains, however, is to do with the connections between the different areas of research I have discussed. The ‘cultural circuit’ model and my simplified triangle identify several key areas of study that, when taken together, should provide a comprehensive account of children’s relationships with media. Even so, this kind of multi-faceted approach is not easy to achieve in practice; and theorising the relationships between the different ‘moments’ or elements is a complex matter. In practice, it is often difficult to take account of the ‘balance of forces’ between structure and agency. On the one hand, there is a view of childhood (and by extension, of the subjectivity of children) as somehow inexorably produced by powerful institutional and textual discourses; while on the other is the view that real children somehow automatically and inevitably evade those constructions. Accounting for the real slippages and inconsistencies here - and doing so in empirical terms, rather than simply through recourse to a series of ‘in principle’ theoretical qualifications - is a continuing endeavour.

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