

Beyond the Boundaries of the Sacred Garden: Children¹ and the Internet

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Concern about children and the Internet is the latest in a ritual cycle of moral panics surrounding new technologies. Such panics often focus on children and are related to adult anxieties surrounding the transgression of boundaries including those between adult/child, private/public, and work/leisure. They are also founded on technological determinist accounts of media and an essentialist view of childhood.

The authors of this article argue that the Internet, as other media before it, plays an important role in the socialisation of the young and that children need to be recognised as active participants rather than passive recipients of multimedia messages. In any case, as the sociologist David Buckingham (2000) emphasised, the proliferation of new technologies, together with the increased fragmentation of audiences, now render almost impossible the "protection" of the young by the adult members of electronic societies. His claim is supported by a recent Australian study by Nightingale, Dickerson and Griff (2000) that highlighted the important role media play in the transition from childhood to adulthood along with children's adeptness in circumventing adult control. Consequently, there needs to be a shift away from the current emphasis on restriction and protection, to a focus on communication and consultation between adults and children.

... the electronic media play an increasingly significant role in defining the cultural experiences of contemporary childhood. Children can no longer be excluded from these media and the things they represent; nor can they be confined to material that adults perceive to be good for them. The attempt to protect children by restricting their access to media is doomed to fail. On the contrary, we now need to pay much closer attention to how we prepare children to deal with these experiences; and in doing so, we need to stop defining them simply in terms of what they lack. (Buckingham, 2000, p. 16)

A 1999 study² revealed that in Australia, approximately 2/3 of 6-17 year olds were Internet users and preferred it to books, radio, and Pay TV. In November 2000, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that approximately 50% of Australian children aged 5 to 14 had gone online in the past year. The Australian Government has responded to community concern³ about the possible harm to children posed by the Internet by establishing legislation (January, 2000) which requires Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to take "all reasonable steps" to ensure access to prohibited material is denied. All ISPs are now required to provide links to blocking or filtering software for families. This legislation of course assumes that parents are sufficiently computer literate to utilise them. Concern about children and the Internet is the latest in a "ritual cycle" of moral or media panics surrounding new technologies (Green, 2002, p. 50). Such panics often focus on children and are related to adult anxieties surrounding the transgression of boundaries including those between adult/child, private/public, and work/leisure. They are also founded on technological determinist accounts of media and an essentialist view of childhood that sees children as particularly susceptible to media "effects."

The authors of this article argue that the Internet, as other media before it, plays an important role in the socialisation of the young and that children need to be recognised as active—and often sophisticated—participants rather than passive recipients of multimedia texts and messages. Consequently, there needs to be a shift away from the current emphasis on restriction and protection, to a focus on communication and consultation between adults and children.

Historical (hysterical) concerns surrounding youth and its culture extend back to ancient Greek and Roman societies. They are aired in Aristophanes' *The Clouds* (423 BC) and in the comedies of Plautus and Terence (Boethius, 1995, p. 39). Examples of more recent media texts which were once derided as harmful to children—and which are now regarded as "children's classics"—include *Gulliver's Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Sesame Street* (Kinder, 1999, p. 3). Stanley Cohen (1972) claimed that the mass

media play a significant role in the creation of moral panics. Such panics tend to arise when a technology or changes to the cultural status quo cause alarm amongst a significant portion of society. More recently, Kirsten Drotner (1992) (as cited in Boethius, 1995, p. 44) coined the term “media panic,” since moral panics in regard to the young tend to focus on new media and its potential danger to them. Moral panics about new media also tend to be kindled by old media (newspapers in relation to the telegraph; television with regard to violent videos and Net pornography) as the new media pose a threat to the power base of the established media. “The emerging media threaten established profits, existing social structures, job security and herald the redundancy of respected skills” (Evans & Butkus cited in Green, 2002, p. 150).

Chapman and Chapman (2000, p. 17) argued that whilst technology itself is neutral (a contested notion⁴), new technology could present new, previously unavailable opportunities for behaviour. Anxiety surrounds the Internet for its apparent ability to remove (young) individuals from their social setting, yet older technologies such as the book, the telephone, and television share this trait. Recent parental concerns surrounding the possibility of their children forming inappropriate relationships and/or being exposed to “adult” knowledge through the Internet have a number of precedents in older technologies. One example is Carolyn Marvin’s (1988) anecdote concerning the way in which the telegraph enabled a young woman, against her father’s wishes, to maintain a “‘flirtation’ with a number of men on the wire” (p. 74) in the 19th century.

Adult anxiety inevitably surrounds children and youth: the “avant-garde of consumption” as they are more exposed to the influence of new media; are more knowledgeable about it, and because their media habits and cultural preferences challenge normative values surrounding good and bad culture (Boethius, p. 48). So, for example, Net porn panic is not only based on a clash of intergenerational value systems but also relates to a fear about the results of differential technological competence. Parents are initiated sexually, but “if they are uninitiated technologically, they lose the power base from which to set the markers for progressive socialisation”⁵ (Green, 2002, p. 150).

Media panics relate to adult anxiety about the transgression of boundaries. Boundary fears centre on our perceived inability to control any threshold, such as nation or home, and our consequent anxiety concerning penetration and pollution (Silverstone, 1999, p. 91). Mary Douglas’s (1966) classic anthropological study examined the boundaries delineating inside/outside the body and their associated body taboos; and the boundary between self/other that is seen as necessary to prevent the outside from swamping the self and to keep the self from dissolving into its surroundings.

For the parent, the Internet, like television, may represent an external source of knowledge/corruption that enables the dissolution of the boundaries between domestic/public and adult/child, whereas, for the child who has grown up with the television and the computer, these media may form part of her conception of “home” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 91). Our desire to preserve and protect the house is related to philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s (1994) description of its prime function: “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (p. 6). Increasingly, communications technologies are enabling the dissolution of the boundaries between inside and outside, and between private and public. Home has become “a mediated space” and media “a domesticated space” within which the (computer) screen functions as “the electronic threshold” (Silverstone, 1999, pp. 93-95). Sherry Turkle (1999, p. 298) argued further that as we “become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via the technology,” the boundary between the human and the technological is less definable. She claimed that our experiences on the Internet are part of a “larger cultural context [of] eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and the inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self” (p. 288).

Parental concern about children’s media use is also exacerbated by its placement in the bedroom: “a complex enclave of security, pleasure, vulnerability and privacy” (Marshall, 1997, p. 74). While parents recognise computer competency as essential for their children’s futures, they fear “inappropriate” use of the computer (i.e., entertainment rather than educational) and, perhaps, more pertinently, exclusion from the “sacred garden” of their children’s spaces and culture. (In this case, it is the children, rather than the adults who erect the boundaries). Adult’s attempts to maintain boundaries of “home” and “work/education” and “legitimate computer use” persist in spite of the fact that, in the electronic age, work and play merge for both adults and children (Meyrowitz as cited in Green, 2002, p.53).

Concern about the Internet (the public sphere) has tended to focus on pornography and the need to protect children (the private sphere) from its effects. As Marsha Kinder (1999) noted,

[those] who see kids primarily as passive victims tend to focus on a single element of media culture (such as violence or pornography), which can readily be isolated for study or censorship, and whose representations and dangers are presumed to affect all children in the same way. (p. 3)

She cited David Morley’s ⁶ ethnographic studies of television watching within families as exemplifying the need to pay attention to the broader context in which media is read.

While rejecting the utopian/dystopian binarisms: “death of childhood/electronic generation,” sociologist David Buckingham (2000) claimed that children will only become competent media users if they are treated as if they are competent. He argued that children’s “apparently premature experience” of “adult” life is regarded as a sign of social failure rather than one of empowerment or autonomy and that this has tended to result in calls for increased adult control over children (p. 76). However, he pointed out that the proliferation of new technologies together with the increased fragmentation of audiences now render almost impossible the “protection” of the young by the adult members of electronic societies. More importantly, even if it were possible, the confinement and protection of children is not altogether desirable, since the perceived need for this is grounded in an essentialist view of both childhood and the communications media. According to this view, childhood is seen as residing in a mythical past “Golden Age” that is now considered to be under threat by technological development.

We cannot return children to the secret garden of childhood, or find the magic key that will keep them forever locked within its walls. Children are escaping into the wider adult world—a world of danger and opportunities, in which the electronic media are playing an ever more important role. The age in which we could hope to protect children from the world is passing. We must have the courage to prepare them to deal with it, to understand it, and to become more active participants in their own right. (Buckingham, 2000, p. 207)

The authors of this article argue that the path toward autonomy and full participation in the socio-political world is a continuum: one that is increasingly bound up with, and dependent upon, engagement with multiple and varied media texts. Politics is not restricted to the actions of governments and other adult institutions, but includes the daily power struggles that occur within family and peer groups; at school and at home; and which are enacted, constructed, played out or replayed in the media: on television news broadcasts; in soap operas or “reality” programs; on music videos and CDs; and in Web animations or Internet chat rooms.

Media theorist Kevin Barnhurst (1998) noted that children’s friendship groups are often formed around media texts and that these texts function as sites of power contestation. These friendship groups—those based around media fandom or at Internet chat sites—often represent the first bonds formed outside the family, thereby marking the first steps towards social interaction, participation, and power. Lelia Green (2002) also regarded the media as an important aid in the socialisation of young family members, but one that can enable bonding within families by providing access to material

that can provide a “common ground” for cross-generational household discussions (p. 57). Recent research in Australia seems to support Green’s claim, showing that, rather than isolating individuals, the Internet promotes family interaction⁷. Green argued that discussion and use of ICTs can enable the formation of a sense of “collective identity” (p. 58).

This inside/outside community dynamic, like other border concerns, carries the fear of engulfment. Underpinning these fears of life in communities beyond the boundary is a belief that life in one’s own community is substantially different from life elsewhere. A major part of the project of community-building is to use material about life “outside” to persuade oneself that the home community is the best place to be. In this respect, the Internet—as with broadcasting—offers much [real life] community-affirming material. (Green, 2002, pp. 59-60)

A recent Australian study by Nightingale, Dickenson, and Griff (2000) highlighted the important role (broadcast) media play in the transition from childhood to adulthood and also noted children’s adeptness in circumventing adult control as a deliberate strategy in the formation of their developing identities⁸.

In contemporary Australian society there is no single absolute marker of the transition from child to adult, as demonstrated by the different ages at which individuals may legally consume alcohol, engage in sexual activity, view adult content and vote...the young people in this study demonstrated the importance of the part the media play in [the] transition, and in the process of identity formation. (p. 3)

Like Buckingham, Nightingale et al. (2000), argued the importance of consultation rather than regulation, noting that parental attempts to police or censor children’s media use often prove to be “counter-productive” (p. 14). The children in the study considered parental fears of media harm as “vastly exaggerated.” The researchers concluded:

All children face the developmental task of eventually attaining adulthood. In order to do so children need space to develop and to test out their ideas and views about media materials, whether those materials are made for them, or adults...The challenge for parents, and also for good government policy, is clearly to assist children’s development, not to increase the levels of secret media activity. (p.14)

New communications technologies are forcing us to reconceptualise our places and status, our borders and boundaries, including those defining/dividing parent and child. Instead of investing all of our energies into their protection, we should also be considering children's rights as emerging citizens in an electronic society. These include their rights to be consulted, educated, and prepared for their new multimedia experiences in the increasingly mediated world inside/outside the mythical walls of childhood's "sacred garden."

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Notes

1. We accept the legal definition of children as those below 16 years of age.
2. "Children, Teenagers and the Internet in Australia," IMR Worldwide. The report studied 500 metropolitan dwelling 6-17 year olds and their parents.
3. The Bertelsmann Foundation in cooperation with the Australian Broadcasting Authority undertook a survey in Australia, Germany and the USA in June 1999. The survey indicated "a high level of public perception that the Internet entails some risks for some users," www.aba.gov.au/what/online/research.htm
4. Weapons technology, for example, is specifically designed to cause harm to human beings.
5. A US senator quoted in a study by Evans and Butkus (1997).
6. See Morley, D. (1986) *Family television: cultural power and domestic leisure*, London: Routledge.
7. Results of the research project Internet@home were published in Barker, Garry, "Adults Are Outsourcing Youngsters in the Family Experience," *Age*, May 28, 2001, p. 7.
8. A La Trobe University study (*It's Just Easier: The Internet as a Safety Net for Same Sex Attracted Young People*) of 200 same sex people aged 14-21 across Australia found that respondents were using chatrooms and pornography sites for information. The majority reported that the net reduced their isolation and put them in touch with people like themselves.