

Book: *Regulation, Awareness, Empowerment: Young People and Harmful Media Content in the Digital Age*

Editor: Ulla Carlsson

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Reviewer: Andy Ruddock

Premised on the understanding that youth stand 'in the midst of the global development of communication and media' (Carlsson, p. 11), this collection aims to establish the risks that power imbalances in global media cultures pose for young people and to outline pragmatic action options in this regard. These issues are explored in a manner that is neither anti-media nor paternalistic. *Regulation, awareness, empowerment* warns that new media environments can threaten and taint young lives in a number of ways. Yet these same environments also offer great democratic potential. Cumulatively, the collection is cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of both protecting and empowering young media users.

Following Ulla Carlsson's introduction, Sonia Livingstone and Andrea Milwood-Hargrave distinguish 'harm' and 'offence' from 'effect', with a view to giving young people a voice in regulatory matters. The recognition of the case for harm established by experimental research, especially vis-à-vis the vulnerability of young men to media violence, must be balanced against the likelihood that for most young people, most of the time, most media are neither harmful nor offensive. Nonetheless, the equivocal evidence on media effects allows firm conclusions. Instead of beginning from media and working toward social problems, the search for effects should be "replaced by an approach that seeks to identify the range of factors that directly and indirectly, through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena" (p. 32). In this, a move from harm to "offence", the sort of media that young people find objectionable, is key to including youth in the conversation on how to foster inclusive cultures.

Livingstone & Milwood-Hargrave introduce the theme of what general claims we can make within a field of research that must be sensitive to difference and empirical particularity. Schulz & Held address this question in a chapter on co-regulation. The authors outline why traditional state centred regulation is no longer desirable or possible. First, technology and industrial design is always at least one step ahead of reactive policy. Second, paternalism frequently engenders hostility from those it endeavours to protect, since it tends to be formulated in the absence of any knowledge of or research into user perspectives. Hence co-regulation, which combines "non-state regulation and state regulation in such a way that non-state regulatory systems link up with state regulation". However, effective co-regulation must mean more than the simple grafting together of existing statutory and voluntary forms of governance. Furthermore, where the need for effective regulation is amplified by the success of proactive, coherent media industry strategies, the possibilities for success are hindered by the piecemeal developments of co-regulatory systems that reflect different media histories. This is illustrated in reviews of different approaches to co-regulation pursued in the Netherlands, the UK, Germany and Australia.

Following a somewhat incongruous chapter by Bu Wei, looking at how Chinese media covers child protection issues (Chinese media tend to cover child vulnerability as a foreign problem, but when child issues are covered they tend to be done in a way that exploits youth), Davina Frau-Meigs continues the regulatory theme applied to the problems of media violence and cultural imperialism. Frau-Meigs agrees that traditional regulatory mechanisms are hampered by an inability to move with changing media environments (in terms of not only production and distribution but also reception and use), and that censorship tends to inhibit young people, in terms of their abilities and willingness to articulate tastes and needs. Yet other conventional measures, like quotas and taxes, do appear to have positive cultural benefits in some parts of Europe such as France. However, "Media education is probably the best long-term filter" as it "can best accommodate the balance...between and environmental perspective, that pushes for control and protection, and a sustainable development view that promotes empowerment and participation of all actors involved, especially young people" (p. 96).

Juliet Schlor elaborates the collection's pessimistic optimism with reference to advertising and young people. Noting the massive increase in expenditure on child and youth directed advertising, that in turn reflects the growing centrality of young people in consumer decision making processes, Schlor concludes that "the unchecked growth of corporate power, and its fusion with state power, has led to a situation in which children's interests cannot be adequately ensured" (p. 116). But growing public consciousness of the pervasiveness of commercial messages has prompted industrial monitoring and change suggesting that strategies to educate and mobilise the public around media issues may bear fruit. This indeed is the only option in a world of commercial messages where it is clear that the state either cannot or will not act in defence of young people.

Much as this collection aspires toward the multi-method study of new media environments and their risks to children, it remains largely framed within mass communications. However, Vitor Reia-Baptista's chapter on the

Internet and narrative structure demonstrates what a move into cultural theory and method promises for the shift from 'effects' to 'risk'. For Reia-Baptista, new media environments provoke a trust crisis. The primary risk the WWW poses relates to its capacity to erode traditional markers of informational authenticity and credibility, making young users unsure of what and who they can believe. Media literacy initiatives therefore become all the more important. At the same time, this 'problem' has the positive effect of clarifying how media use implies contemplation of the relation between self and world. This can be explicated a matter by an engagement with cultural theory, which connects new environments with old questions about relations between communication and identity.

Finally, Ulla Carlsson returns to consider what the public think about media, young people and risk. Using Swedish survey data, she argues that although there are examples of a generational divide – where older people tend to be more concerned about the effects that media sex and violence have on the young than young people are – young people do worry about the effects of gaming and internet pornography. There is a general trend toward favouring self-regulation, but much remains to be understood about the primary damage that pornography probably does; shaping perceptions about the reality of gender relations.

The rest of the book outlines current thinking on what media literacy is and what it means not only for young people but also for their parents and education professionals. It also details a number of international resources and initiatives in these areas. These are designed to address concerns over risk in a manner which empowers young people.

Regulation, awareness, empowerment: young people and harmful media content in the digital age provides exactly the sort of well organized, empirically detailed account of contemporary issues in youth, media and risk that one has come to expect from NORDICOM, and is essential reading for anyone working in these areas.

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