Review:

Papadopoulos, Linda: *Sexualisation of Young People Review*, London: Home Office Publication, February 2010, pp 100, available at: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-young-people

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I had no great hopes for Linda Papadopoulos' *Sexualisation of Young People Review* and it didn't disappoint. Commissioned by the Home Office as part of its drive to incorporate research into the policy agenda and, in this instance, to contribute to its formulation of initiatives to combat the problem of violence against women, the review was intended to uncover the ways in which 'sexualisation' has contributed to a climate in which violence against women is condoned. Purposed for government and emerging from within a particular strand of governmentality, there was never any doubt that the report would be one-sided and intellectually suspect.[1] There is little in its litany of complaints and accusations about media effects that audience researchers have not read before - but as with the two similar reports published in the US (APA Report) and Australia (Parliament Report)[2], Papadopoulos' review is likely to become a standard citation for future work into the production and consumption of media with sexual themes.

Over an eighteenth month period, media darling and honorary visiting reader at London Metropolitan University, Linda Papadopoulos reviewed hundreds of academic articles and consulted many academic and youth work professionals. The body of the report is divided into eight main sections: an executive summary, introduction and chapter on 'background and context' lay out the main terrain and further chapters 'what is sexualisation and why does it matter?', 'sexualised content and the mainstreaming of pornography', 'the impact of sexualisation' and 'sexualisation of violence' offer up the evidence, with a final chapter offering thirty six recommendations. The review claims that sexualized media:

1. contribute to lack of self-worth in girls because they suggest that girls are only worthy if they are beautiful and/or sexy;
2. contribute to the aggrandizement of masculinity in boys;
3. give false ideas, about sex, sexuality and women;
4. devalue love and relationships;
5. supply details about how to have sex which are not premised on ideals of equality and mutuality;
6. supply scripts for performing sexualized femininity and/or masculinity and therefore
7. create the conditions for the continuance and acceptance of violence against women.

In these claims, it repeats the claims of the APA report and, like it, suggests that parents and teachers, indeed all 'responsible' adults, have proved powerless in the face of the media's promulgation of distorted messages and that children lack the necessary skills to combat these messages on their own. Government needs to take control via a number of measures including age restrictions on 'lad's mags', a watershed for explicit music videos, media literacy initiatives, the removal from Job Centres of job adverts for work in the adult entertainment industries and 'the establishment of a media award that promotes diverse, aspirational and non-sexualised portrayals of young people' (15).

This is a review designed to build consensus and sets about its task with moral verve and a call to participation in a set of concerns about what's happening to 'our kids'. Papadopoulos lays out the parameters of the review quite clearly, as 'a psychologist and as a mother' she has concerns about the 'hyper-sexualisation and objectification of girls on the one hand, and hyper-masculinisation of boys on the other' (3) citing 'inappropriate clothing and games for children' as key and insisting that 'I want my little girl, indeed, all girls and boys, to grow up confident about who they are and about finding and expressing their individuality and sexuality, but not through imposed gender stereotypes or in a way that objectifies the body or commodifies their burgeoning sexuality.' (4) Beginning with her personal worries, Papadopoulos moves swiftly to evidence of growing concern amongst parents, teachers and cultural commentators that children are inappropriately sexualized by the media that surrounds them.

The term 'sexualisation' is one which has achieved a dubious currency – like its counterparts, pornographication and pornification – it's a term which benefits from remaining unexamined and untheorised. As with other authors' mobilizations of those terms (with the notable exceptions of Attwood, McNair and Paasonnen) Papadopoulos does not offer any significant discussion of her working definition of 'sexualisation' - other than to claim that 'sexualisation is the imposition of adult sexuality on to children and young people before they are capable of dealing with it (mentally, emotionally or physically'). The term 'sexualisation' should have

been properly interrogated, exploring its multiple uses to explain current media representations, practices and consumption.

This is not simply a question of semantics – 'sexualisation' as it is used by Linda Papadopolous is both vague and obscure. A *review* ought to trace patterns and trajectories but Papadopoulos' formulation of 'sexualisation' as a process conflates a whole range of textual forms, behaviours, interests and practices. She presents 'sexualisation' in simplistic terms, as a singular object of concern and children as 'incomplete' beings unable to resist the blandishments of the media designed to seduce them.

That those concerns exist is undeniable - just one week before the review's publication, David Cameron was making a similar point on the GMTV couch - but the review does little to explore how and why these fears have come to acquire such potency. And it is here that the particular inadequacies of Papadopoulos' approach become apparent – rather than examine the terrain of debate in order to assess the evidence for the claims of increasing sexualisation of culture and, from there, uncover any discernable links between sexualisation and the normalization of violence against women, she takes those links as already proven. Indeed, the violence issue rapidly disappears from view, rarely surfacing except in some brief invocations of already widely-debated and discredited research from within the effects tradition that claimed to have discovered links between viewing pornography and acceptance of 'rape myths'.

Despite its focus on the media as the carriers of dubious messages, the review does very little to evidence its particular claims. To take one example as indicative of the narrowness of Papadopoulos' conceptual understanding of media, consumption and consumers interests: in her discussion of music videos, Papadopoulos ignores the ways in which popular music expresses more than 'just' sex – the lyrics and images of music from rock to rap deal with the huge and varied array of emotional feelings which enrich our lives. Music's charge, for young and old alike, surely lies in its vocalizing of feelings and emotions which may be difficult, even problematic. To reduce the thousands of songs and videos to carriers of 'bad attitudes', as Papadopoulos does, reflects a very naïve understanding of the ways in which media have resonance and importance in peoples' everyday lives. Moreover, the 'analysis' of individual music videos included in the review – 'Tip Drill' by Nelly and 'P.I.M.P.' by 50 per cent (50) - relies entirely on gut reactions and the claim from one single source that 'teenagers who preferred popular songs with degrading sexual references were more likely to engage in intercourse or in pre-coital activities.' (50) And it is here that we get to the most significant problem with this review: Papadopoulos constructs the child as an 'identity category' (MacDonald, 2008) whose entitlement is 'innocence' and who must be protected by a range of disciplinary and institutional interventions.

One might imagine that such a review would include work which has actually investigated young peoples' media interests or explored the forms of participation young people enjoy, but such imaginings are demonstrably utopian when one views the review's bibliography. Not only is the bibliography remarkably thin on work from within those disciplines which have researched media outputs and their address to younger audiences but it completely ignores anything which might have contributed young peoples' voices to the mix.

Despite her anxieties about children's sense making and the messages they receive from their supposed daily diet of x-rated music videos, violent video games, Bratz dolls and Playboy pencil cases, Papadopoulos fails to even consider that young people may have something to say – that they may have interests in formulating the problem and conceiving of its solutions. Instead we have the usual worries, that children are 'bombarded', 'surrounded', 'under-pressure' from messages and must be protected from those and from their own 'inadequate' understandings of the world.

The above criticisms of Papadopoulos' report should not be read as a diminution of the real social evil that is domestic or more generalized violence against women, but this review contributes nothing to our understandings of those problems. Moreover it fails to illuminate anything substantive about the ways in which sexual themes are components of myriad media forms which young people are encountering and seeking out. It has nothing useful to say about the ways in which children and young people might engage or participate in the contemporary media landscape, sexual or not. It was unlikely that Papadopoulos would engage in any form of research that would be recognizable as 'audience research' but young people deserve a better accounting than this.

Biographical Note

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References

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[1] Inadequacy does not necessarily follow directly from government commissioning – David Buckingham et al's recent report – *Sexualised Goods Aimed at Children* (http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/equal/reports-10/eor10-02.htm) - for the Scottish Parliament and the *Byron Report: Safer Children in a Digital World* by Tanya Byron (http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/actionplan/index.shtml) stand as models here.

[2] 'The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualisation of Girls' (2007), available online: http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf; 'Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media', available online: http://www.aph.gov.au/SENATE/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/report/index.htm