

## Review:

### **Buckingham, David et al. (2009): 'The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing: Report of an Independent Assessment', Report to the Department of Culture, Media & Sport.**

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Debates relating to children's relationships with the mass media are traditionally characterised by the dichotomous 'framing' of children as being either passive victims or as savvy, knowing media consumers. This set of opposing discourses is usefully mapped and assessed in a recent report about 'The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing' (2009).

David Buckingham, a respected international authority on media education and children's engagements with the media more broadly, together with a panel of nine scholars<sup>1</sup> published the report to coincide with second anniversary of *The Children's Plan* in England<sup>2</sup>. A number of literature reviews and pieces of original field research were commissioned (between April 2008 and March 2009), and various stakeholder events and consultations were held.

The panel was presented with a clear remit by the Department of Children, Schools & Families (DCSF). They were asked to 'gather evidence' about 'commercial engagement', in terms of its changing nature and the extent of children's involvement in it, and to assess the potential (positive and/or negative) impacts of the commercial world on children's wellbeing. They were also asked to garner the views of both parents and children. The report makes clear that the intention was 'not to make policy recommendations' but to 'gather and evaluate evidence' (p. 5), mapping the terrain that must be understood and negotiated by policy-makers and other interested parties.

The report is presented in five substantial parts. In Part One, the scene is set by presenting an overview of the context in which the work was undertaken. This includes consideration of how contemporary public debate can powerfully shape the nature of 'concerns' about the

status of the commercial world in children's everyday lives. The second part outlines what is known about how the children's market is constructed and segmented to reflect and define target audience wants and needs (cf. Schor, 2004; Del Vecchio, 1997). This part of the report also explores how consumption practices play out in the context of the family, how children behave as consumers and how they are addressed by marketers.

The main issues relevant to an assessment of 'impact' are explored in the third part of the report. This section usefully outlines how the notion of 'impact' has tended to be evidenced in terms of unhelpful cause-and-effect relationships which are always highly problematic within media and cultural studies and 'do not do justice to the complexity of issues' at stake (p. 3). Questions of both 'benefit' and ethical implications are reflected on, before the problems and concerns associated with increased commercialisation are thematically explored in terms of: wellbeing and mental health; conflict within families and peer groups; physical health; sexualisation, body image and gender; inappropriate content; and poverty and inequality.

In Part Four of the report, questions of consumption are (re-)located within the conventional framework of 'childhood' and children's everyday lives, with due consideration given to children's television, play and education. The focus shifts from an account of commercial messages to that of commercial *decisions*, defined by the authors as 'the ways in which commercial forces and pressures more broadly determine the kinds of goods and services that are available to children' (p. 133) which, arguably, shape the very nature of 'childhood'. In the final section of the report, the various mapped strands are drawn together by proposing possible policy trajectories, although the authors stress that their conclusions should not be read as set of recommendations.

The report contains some original social research focusing on the views of parents and children. Parental input was sought via an online questionnaire, so the sample was inevitably self-selective. Strikingly, on the whole, the parents were less concerned about commercialism than they were about more general social issues, such as the availability of alcohol and drugs. However, they did include reference to 'media, marketing and new technologies' (p. 34) when expressing their anxieties. Generally, the parents took issue with the tone and content of some advertisements, suggesting that children were being over-exposed to often inappropriate material (especially through television and billboard advertising), advertising being a multi-media/platform assault, and marketing messages tending to be over-sexualised and highly stereotyped (in terms of gender and ethnicity).

Despite noting the 'pester power' pressures exerted on them, the parents were also realistic about the commercial realities of contemporary society and tended to view advertising and commercialism as an 'inescapable' (p. 34) part of life. This would appear to echo the

sentiments evident in media literacy debates (cf. Ofcom), where helping children and young people to be critically reflective and to make informed commercial choices is considered preferable to the protectionist stance embedded in attempts to impose outright bans on advertising to children. This is further underpinned by conceptions of 'consumer socialisation' and the 'consumer citizen' (e.g. John, 2003; Cronin, 2000).

Focus group work was conducted with around two hundred teenagers (commissioned from Sherbert<sup>3</sup>) and it became clear that the respondents viewed the commercial world as integral to their everyday lives, in terms of facilitating communication, socialising, friendships, learning, creating and exploring (p. 38). Recent work by Livingstone (2009) reports similar sentiments about new technologies. Interestingly, many of the young people understood and acknowledged the 'give-and-take' nature of commercial media; tolerating, for example, online advertising in order to benefit from the affordances of social networking sites.

The young people were acutely aware of persuasive intent and questioned the nature of 'truth' in advertisements, and they were especially critical about issues of privacy. Comments were made about the more personalised, participatory and one-to-one approaches now being adopted by companies who exploit the self-disclosed information young people post online. Newer commercial tactics include, for example, viral marketing, 'advergaming' and peer-to-peer marketing (p. 9). The authors note that the young people seemed more aware of these subtle forms of marketing than the parents were (p. 39). Finally, when asked about 'influence', the young people in this study consistently regarded their family and friends as being a more significant force in their lives than the commercial media flowing around their lives.

In this report, the authors endeavour to present a reasoned and balanced snap-shot of research findings. They note that the debates about children and the commercial world are a product of particular socio-cultural paradigms which shape and frame the ways in which children, 'childhood' and the media are conceptualised. Published research in this field – often inflected by the social codes, conventions and agendas of the countries in which the work was produced – can be emotive, highly politicised and polarised. Buckingham et al. note that a key problem with attempting to assess the 'evidence' is a lack of transparency, and the often limited scope and questionable quality of the research (p. 33). Methods are often unclear and samples ill-defined, yet the emergent patterns are presented as irrefutable 'fact', forcing the bigger debate into cyclic truisms. The authors do what they can to move beyond the binary arguments by mapping the more subtle 'shades of grey', applying a range of complex considerations to their assessments, and identifying tensions, contradictions and inconclusive results. They stress a need for further research to 'probe public opinion... (in) greater depth', to generate data that is more representative of a broader range of social groups, and to 'assess the views of younger children' (p. 42).

Interestingly, Buckingham et al. (p. 28) note that, against such a seemingly dichotomous backdrop of discourse, the concerns that were expressed by the parents and young people in this study were 'much more diverse and much more equivocal', often challenging the negativist 'toxic childhood' perspective that can dominate debate (e.g. Palmer, 2006). The authors conclude that the truth about children's negotiations and understandings of the commercial world might lie somewhere between the caricatures of the 'victim' (as touted by anti-commercial campaigners) and the 'savvy know-it-all' (as constructed by marketers).

### **Biographical Note**

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### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> Panel members were: Prof. David Buckingham (Chair), Prof. Patrick Barwise, Prof. Hugh Cunningham, Dr. Mary Jane Kehily, Prof. Sonia Livingstone, Mary MacLeod, Dr. Lydia Martens, Dr. Virginia Morrow, Dr. Agnes Nairn, and Dr. Brian Young (Details available in Appendix B: [http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Appendix-B\\_Panel-details.pdf](http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Appendix-B_Panel-details.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> *The Children's Plan*, launched in 2007, is described by the Department for Children, Schools & Families as: 'a vision for change to make England the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. It put the needs and wishes of families first, setting out clear steps to make every child matter'.

<sup>3</sup> Sherbert is a UK-based (market) research company that specializes in working with children and young people. See: <http://www.sherbertresearch.com/>