

## **Beyond nostalgia: writing the history of children's media culture**

*This short paper is based on a presentation I gave as part of a workshop at Copenhagen University in late 2014. I try to make the case for a historical approach to studying children's media, but also point to some pitfalls and dilemmas.*

Several years ago, the BBC produced a short video to promote its children's programming. It was largely an exercise in nostalgia, aimed not so much at children themselves, but at their parents. The video featured a young boy, dressed in old-fashioned school uniform, walking us through the history of children's television since the 1950s – a seamless collection of images and clips that older adult viewers would be bound to recognise. Meanwhile, the commentary told a story about national identity, education and childhood that harked back, with some gentle irony, to a pastoral golden age. I wrote about this video at some length in the introduction to my book *Small Screens: Television for Children* (2002), and I was intrigued – although not surprised – to find a copy of it on a YouTube channel called 'Cult Kids TV Corner'.<sup>1</sup>

There is a great deal at stake in the history of children's media, and in how we tell that history, not only for academics, but for a much wider audience. Yet in the UK more recently, a rather different version of that history has emerged, with the revelation that several of the best-loved children's TV entertainers of the 1960s and 1970s were predatory paedophiles. The cases of Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris may only have been the tip of the iceberg. It turns out that the family favourite *Doctor Who* was produced at one stage by a prolific sex abuser, John Nathan-Turner; and that several of the benevolent 'uncles' who presented children's radio and TV shows in the early 1950s were also paedophiles.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there is another complex history to be told here, not least about changing ideas about sexuality and childhood over the intervening decades: the fact that an organisation called the Paedophile Information Exchange could enjoy a marginal acceptability on the political left in the 1970s is certainly worthy of wider reflection.

In putting these two histories together, I am in no sense making light of some seriously horrific events. However, these scandals do raise some very awkward questions about what might be at stake in adults' address to the child – and what forms of desire and power are entailed in making media for children. Contrasting the BBC's self-promotional story of its past with the facts that are now emerging reinforces the difficulty of making sense of the past, and of writing history.

### **The nostalgia industry**

Media Studies has often suffered from a compulsive fascination with the new. This is particularly the case when we talk about children and young people. Sometimes it is hard to be heard if you are not talking about the very latest developments – although by the time you come to produce decent research, things have almost invariably moved on. Yet while I would agree that Media Studies needs a much stronger sense of history, we also need to avoid the temptation of nostalgia – again, a temptation that is particularly strong when it comes to recollecting childhood and youth.

The Cult Kids TV Corner on YouTube is only part of a thriving nostalgia industry around children's media, at least in English-speaking countries. The focus here is especially on the 1970s and 1980s, when most of the enthusiasts would have been growing up themselves, and it is now beginning to extend into the 1990s. There are several elaborate fan websites devoted to children's and young people's media of earlier decades: it is very easy to find out pretty much anything you might possibly wish to know about old episodes of *He Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *Round the Twist* or *Grange Hill*. There is also a significant market in related merchandise, with adult collectors buying and selling media-related toys and other spin-off goods that were seen at the time as ephemeral and largely worthless. We have also seen the revival and re-making of properties from earlier decades – from *Doctor Who* to *Bill and Ben*, and from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to *21 Jump Street* – in ways that clearly target both adult and child audiences.

Some of this might be seen as a manifestation of postmodern irony, although it's often hard to tell. For example, I am not at all sure how to interpret the phenomenon of the Bronies, the adult male fans of *My Little Pony*. Is this merely some kind of camp critique of old-fashioned gender roles, or does it reflect a sincere (and possibly nostalgic) desire to return to childhood innocence? Attending the third annual BronyCon later this year might offer some answers, although this is one convention I might just have to miss. Even so, my sense is that much of this apparent nostalgia for children's popular culture of the past is premised on a view of the past as somehow 'cute' – as charmingly simple and naïve – and on the concomitant view of the present as necessarily knowing and sophisticated.

Of course, nostalgia is complex and multifaceted. It can be unsettling as well as comforting. It is to some extent predicated on a sense of loss or incompleteness in the present. It is not necessarily false or escapist, or politically reactionary. Indeed, it can potentially form the basis of a kind of utopian political critique (in what some scholars have termed 'reflective' nostalgia). However, in this case I would say that much of the nostalgia for children's media of the past is utopian in a negative sense: it is a form of sentimentality that trades in fantasies about childhood innocence and authenticity. It looks back to an imaginary golden age, a natural childhood somehow untainted by commercialism and corruption – a simpler time when things were just so much better than they are today...

### **Why history?**

In my view, one key purpose in writing history should be to puncture these kinds of assumptions – and indeed, the easy alternative story of endless progress. History should tell us the facts, untainted by sentimentality. However, it is often undermined by the tendency to accumulate facts for their own sake. Fact-fetishism is a characteristic not only of nostalgia collectors, but also of some historians. I have been reading some very large books about post-war British history recently, and I have become quite bored with compilations of facts. Facts are not interesting in themselves: they only become interesting in relation to broader themes, and insofar as they explain the broader context. The point of history, in my view, is that it helps to relativise the present – to explain how we got to be where we are, and help us understand how things might change in the future.

One abiding characteristic of public debates about children and media is the belief that what we are seeing now is unprecedented and utterly new. This can take the form of neophobia or neophilia – a fear of the new or a fascinated embrace of it. Often it entails an uneasy and awkward combination of the two. Yet there is an abiding sense that developments in the present or the near future represent some fundamental, irreversible change. This is most obvious in debates around new media, which frequently rest on the claim that digital technology, or social media, have completely rewritten childhood – that these things have precipitated massive changes, not only in the media themselves, but in social life, in individual psychology (they are rewiring children’s brains!), in politics, and in education.

What is then neglected here is the continuity between the past and the present. Again, this is what we look to history to demonstrate. Yet we also need to beware of the opposite argument – the claim that actually nothing is new, that we’ve seen it all before, that nothing ever changes... Trying to figure out the relationships between continuity and change is a fundamental challenge when we consider the history of debates about children and media. On the one hand, there is a strong element of continuity in popular responses to new media and technology. The concerns currently being raised about the internet or mobile media or computer games share much with earlier concerns about television, comics, film, and popular literature. Yet these concerns are not necessarily identical, and each of these media presents different issues and opportunities. To blur them together into some kind of timeless narrative – adults have always been concerned about this stuff, but there’s really nothing to worry about – is to ignore the specific historical contexts in which these media emerge, and to risk judging the past from the perspective of the present.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding history would also seem to be increasingly urgent in a context where the media archive is no longer inaccessible, but with us constantly. This is largely a result of digital technology, but it is also a consequence of the increasing recycling of media properties (currently we have Paddington Bear, Transformers, even the Smurfs...). This material is targeted towards adults as well as children, both in order to encourage parental attendance at cinema screenings and parental purchasing of the related merchandise, and as a means of extending the lifecycle of the products themselves. This cross-generational, historical consumption has implications for the role of media in family relationships – for how adults relate to their ‘inner child’, and how both adults and children define ‘age identities’ (that is, what it *means* to be an adult or a child). Yet there are also implications for the relationship between media and memory: how we relate to the mediated past is bound to change. If everything is accessible, if we do not have to struggle to locate the past, then what is nostalgia? Nostalgia itself also needs to be seen in historical terms, as something that depends on its place in time.

### **Change, continuity and context**

When we look at the history of children’s media culture, it is certainly much easier to see change than continuity. For those who grew up with television in the 1950s and 1960s, today’s multimedia childhoods are bound to appear bewildering: there

have been fundamental changes in technology, in economics, in styles and genres of representation, in producers' assumptions about audiences, in audience practices, and perhaps also in the competencies (or literacies) that audiences require and develop. Yet there are also material and thematic continuities – for instance in how contemporary computer games replay the tropes of older forms of play, how online socializing reproduces older forms of interaction, how technologically driven narratives replay older narratives, how modern technology toys replay the themes of older toys.

There is also a recurrence or persistence of particular ways of addressing and defining the child as a media user. Back in the 1990s, I was part of a team of researchers looking at the history of children's television in Britain.<sup>4</sup> One of our aims was to look at how constructions of childhood in children's television had changed over time. This meant looking at how television producers (and others such as policy-makers, campaigners and regulators) talked about children, as well as how children and adults were represented, and how television addressed children. We argued that these different ways of constructing childhood reflected broader historical shifts in the social relationships between adults and children. These relationships were generally understood in *pedagogical* terms – television was seen as a means of teaching, but also of providing cultural enrichment, stimulating the imagination, making children better people, or (in more recent terms) empowering them, or giving them a voice. All these ideas were informed by theories of child development, even if these were not always explicitly articulated.

As we tracked the evolution of these ideas over time, we developed a historical narrative, in which protectionism gradually gave way to progressivism (or 'child centredness'), which in turn gave way to notions of children's rights, and to ideas of the child as a sovereign consumer. In retrospect, this narrative seems to be one of progress: what it does not acknowledge is the extent to which these different ideas co-exist, and how things sometimes go 'backwards' (although 'forwards' and 'backwards' may not be the most useful way of thinking about this). Raymond Williams argues that at any given time, there may be residual, dominant and emergent ideas co-existing, and potentially competing, with each other.<sup>5</sup> Or to put this another way, there may be different constructions of childhood in relation to media that have different trajectories over time, that may compete and combine and interweave in complicated ways.

We can certainly see evidence of this at present, in public debates around children and the internet. In this area, as in many other areas of public discourse around childhood in UK, the debate is dominated by the notion of *risk*. Concerns about children's safety provide the frame for policy and for a great deal of research, in relation to public space and public services as well as media. And these concerns of course provide the rationale for increasing the regulation and surveillance of children. In many respects, the discussion seems to be going 'back to the past', although it can also be seen as a new response to modernity. The current concerns around paedophilia (both online and offline) dramatize these concerns in a highly spectacular manner, and point to the continuity between contemporary anxieties around the internet and historical concerns about childhood going back throughout the post-war period. How this concern with risk and safety fits with popular nostalgia about childhood is interestingly problematic. It seems that we need both

the fantasy of childhood freedom and the fantasy of adults' total control. These constructions of childhood (naturally innocent and free, but also at-risk and endangered) seem to require or invoke each other.

The task of understanding and explaining these developments raises some methodological challenges. Once we start to dig into a particular historical period, it becomes harder and harder to see anything as typical or representative of how people were thinking or behaving at the time. What do we take as representative of a particular time period? And if we want to compare across time, what do we compare with what? Underlying these questions are the basic questions that have to be addressed by all social researchers: what is our sample – what we are choosing to look at, and what do we think it stands for?

This then raises the issue of how we trace the relation between particular changes and the wider social and historical context. How do we characterise that context? As I have noted, there is a danger of reading the past through the lens of the present; but there is also a danger of overgeneralisation, and even of caricature. This is a danger that academic research on media has not always avoided: there are many studies that seem to combine a rich and complex discussion of text with a thin and superficial discussion of context. In the case of children, the wider context is always refracted in particular ways, and it is often manifested quite indirectly. The effects of social change are somehow muffled, and are often delayed, both in the culture that adults produce for children and in children's experience itself. As such, drawing a direct line from the historical context (however we characterise it) to children's lives may easily appear simplistic. Finally, and more theoretically, we might want to challenge the notion of 'context' itself. How do we draw the line between events (or discourses or representations) and contexts? Is text-and-context a useful way of thinking about this, or are concepts like practice and performance more useful? Here again, a historical approach is indispensable, but its value depends upon what *kind* of historical approach it turns out to be.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIG2-sccZWI>

<sup>2</sup> See Andrew O'Hagan's article 'Light Entertainment', *London Review of Books* 34/21, 2012: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n21/andrew-ohagan/light-entertainment>

<sup>3</sup> I have written about this in much more detail, in collaboration with Helle Jensen: 'Beyond "media panics": reconceptualising public debates about children and media', *Journal of Children and Media* 6(4), 413-429, 2012

<sup>4</sup> See David Buckingham, Hannah Davies, Ken Jones and Peter Kelley, *Children's Television in Britain: History, Discourse and Policy* (British Film Institute, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> This is discussed in his book *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977).