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# Communication Outside the Humanities in Media 'Effects' Research

Leonie Margaret Rutherford, Deakin University, VIC, Australia

*Abstract: This paper draws on the case study of a recent review of research literature on the influences (harms and benefits) on children and families of electronic media content and usage, undertaken on behalf of a Federal regulatory body (Australian Communications and Media Authority) by a multidisciplinary research team. Recent critiques of psychological studies of children and media have challenged the positivist social sciences to look outside of their own disciplinary warrants and to fully answer cultural studies critiques of 'media effects' research. Making connections outside the humanities in this case study involved making the rationales of communications and cultural studies methodologies available to those policy makers who normally may not consider such findings to be evidence-based or policy relevant. But it also involved providing a historical and institutional contextualization of positivist social and medical science findings, a contextualization not enabled by the underlying warrants and discourses of these disciplines. This paper focuses on those sections of the case study project concerned with psychological research on the effects of violent media and epidemiological and public health research on childhood obesity.*

Keywords: Children, Media Effects, Multidisciplinary Research, Research Methods, Childhood Obesity, Violence and Media, Evidence-based Research, Federal Government, Australia, Media, Cultural Studies, Communication Studies, Psychology, Policy Studies, Public Health, Medicine

**D**EBATES ABOUT CHILDREN and media are frequently polarized around questions of whether children's agency is sufficient to ensure successful developmental outcomes for them in an environment dominated by the profit imperative of the large transmedia conglomerates. Left-wing economists and political theorists such as Herman, Chomsky and McChesney cogently critique the ability of corporations to address the needs of the public more generally (Herman & Chomsky 1988; Chomsky 1998; McChesney 2000). They argue that the rise of neoliberalism is a key factor in explaining the corporate media expansion in global reach, market oligopoly and profitability, and that this expansion goes hand in hand with a collapse of the democratic public sphere, a sidelining of public service values in media service provision, and a reduction in quality of media content which might meet the needs of publics more generally, including children. Neoliberalism as an ideology posits that societies function better when markets are allowed to operate free from government regulation, such as protectionist media regulation. Its chief calls are for lower taxation (and thus reduction in government spending in areas of public welfare) and reduction in government interference in the operations of business. Although neoliberalism is often associated with the rise of Reagan and Thatcher in the US and UK in the 1980s, it can be understood to refer to any

policy environment which 'maximize[s] the role of markets and minimize[s] the role of non-market institutions' (McChesney 2000, p. 6), for example, those whose agenda is to promote the welfare of minority groups, such as children. Australian regulatory institutions have reformulated themselves in the contexts of new market ideology, technological change and reformation of global media systems, and these changes frame the institutions' reception of research findings in the area of children and media.

This paper argues that changes in media systems under the effect of neoliberal globalization impact on Australia's regulatory environment and this, in turn, affects the way in which academic research is commissioned, received and communicated by regulatory institutions. The argument is contextualized by means of a case study: a recent review of academic research on the influences of media on children and families, commissioned after a competitive tendering process (along with a survey of media usage undertaken by a market research company) by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). My discussion, thus, partly draws on participant observation of the case study's research process. The appropriation of 'active audience' paradigms (common to cultural studies and interpretative social science research traditions) within Australian regulatory cultures serves to marginalize the

findings of positivist social science disciplines (such as psychology and health sciences).<sup>1</sup> It is from these more empirically-based disciplines that the chief evidence to support government investment in 'public interest' areas, such as children's health and education, come. Moreover, findings from these latter disciplines supply the primary discursive and political challenge to the influence of media conglomerates which may place corporate profits ahead of the provision of media content and services which maximize benefits and minimize harms to children.

While regulators may signal a commitment to 'evidence-based policy' when considering decisions affecting children, this paper argues that an institutional preference exists for research from an 'active audience' paradigm that suggests children are fully able to be self-regulating. Traditionally, differences in theoretical paradigms and methodological warrants have structured a separation between humanities, interpretative social science, and positivist social science research on children and media. These differences hamper researchers' ability to present anything like a united front to facilitate effective communication in a neoliberal policy environment. This, in turn, may effect a sidelining of important research findings. However, humanities researchers are skilled in historicizing and contextualizing ideological and discursive formations—skills not generally part of the training of many scientists. By communicating outside the humanities, the potential exists for the humanities to form a bridge to researchers from social science traditions. By enabling a more unified communication of findings, notwithstanding the existence of genuine interdisciplinary debate over certain research issues and questions, researchers may make it more difficult for policy makers within governments and institutions to select the findings that most clearly mirror their own ideological interests, from amidst the contradictory range of choices offered by scholars from divergent media research traditions (Livingstone 2007) and thus more effectively challenge the influence of corporate interests in dictating the content and commercialisation of children's media. In what follows I (1) outline the changes in global media systems since the 1980s, (2) review the influence of neoliberal market governance on UK and Australian media regulation and regulatory institutions, and (3) document a case study of the impact of resulting policy environments on the generation of research questions and communication of findings. Finally, I argue for greater reflexivity and collaboration among children's researchers

from competing disciplinary traditions in order to more effectively influence the political processes which affect decisions about children and their media environment.

### **Changes in Global Media Systems 1986 to the Present**

As several communications scholars have detailed, there have been dramatic changes in global communications systems in the last two-and-a-half decades. Within the world television system, new broadcasting platforms, such as cable and satellite have become widespread across the globe. Since the mid-nineteen-eighties, as Dal Yong Jin argues, communication industries in Western nations have rapidly expanded their reach in the developing or less-developed countries through mergers and acquisitions which have furthered the hegemony of their own cultural products. Together with the influence of transnational capital through the role of transnational media and communication corporations, Yin identifies two other factors which impinged on the rapidly changing global television-industry system' (Jin 2007, p. 181): the collapse of the Soviet bloc and its economic regimes, and technological development.

These changes in global media structures have been facilitated by the adoption of neoliberal communication policies on the part of national governments around the world (McChesney 2000; Flew 2006; Jin 2007; Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007). Under increasing pressure from transnational corporations, the US and, subsequently, other national governments adopted policies such as market deregulation and the curtailment of state intervention in communication industries expansion. Commentators on the rise of neoliberal communication policies (McChesney 2000, 2001; O'Regan & Goldsmith 2006; Schiller 1999, 2001) note that among the general aims of reducing state intervention in the actions of private firms and a market-oriented discourse that stresses the primacy of business and market forces in social and cultural affairs, the call for the deregulation of communication markets forms a central part of the platform (Jin 2007).

### **Market Centred Governance and Media Regulation**

The rise of market-centred governance in the UK has been discussed in the context of Britain's New Labour discourse and policy in the nineteen-nineties (Needham 2003). In their study of the discursive

<sup>1</sup> On the suppression of recent research on public health by Australian governments, see D'Arcy & Holman (2008); Yazahmeidi & Holman (2007).

debates surrounding the formation and implementation of Britain's *Communications Act 2003*,<sup>2</sup> Sonia Livingstone, Peter Lunt and Laura Miller (2007), trace the core ideologies that underpinned the new regulatory system, which they place firmly within these larger shifts in governance that are, in turn, linked to the rise of neoliberal policy agendas. They detail changes in the concept of 'the public' in official discourses, arguing that:

the nature of regulation is changing in contemporary liberal democracies, from a hierarchical "command and control" approach prioritizing monitoring, compliance and enforcement of legally based property rights, to a more public-facing, self-regulatory approach prioritizing: "decentred" (Black 2002), networked and discursive governance (Chapman, J, Miller & Skidmore 2003; Hall, Hood & Scott 2000; Scott 2001) cited in Livingstone et al., 2007, p. 615).

In the context of media regulation, this entailed the change from a more protectionist and interventionist role for government and regulatory bodies. 'Social control' was advanced through 'the deployment of devices for gathering intelligence, establishing standards,<sup>3</sup> applying categories and monitoring effects' (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007, p. 615) as well as, rather than simply through, enforcement. Thus, in parallel with neoliberal shifts in governmentality more broadly, changes in the ideology of media regulation saw a transition from a protectionist and 'public service' conceptualization of the broadcaster-audience relationship, to a construction of civic participation and identity formation on the part of audiences which was increasingly defined in terms of consumption (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007, p. 614; Smith 2006, p. 937). This construction of the audience as end-user of communication services, as Livingstone et al. argue, is embodied in *Ofcom*'s mission statement, which conflates the terms 'citizen' and 'consumer':

*Ofcom* exists to further the interests of citizen-consumers through a regulatory regime which, where appropriate, encourages competition (p. 613).<sup>4</sup>

*Ofcom* discursively framed itself as 'the regulator of a converged,<sup>5</sup> self-regulatory market (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007, p. 632), distinguished from the more traditional, paternalistic regime, which had ensured the primacy and pre-eminence of the state controlled broadcasters, such as the BBC. Its role, historically, had been understood to address a perceived 'lack' in the audience, to transform a less than agential 'audience' into an informed 'public'. However this public service ideology and the 'command and control' State regulation which underpinned it, subsequently came under sustained critique on the basis that it covertly underwrote regimes of social distinction, devaluing working class or alternative tastes, knowledges and pleasures (Bourdieu 1986; Buckingham 2000, 2003).

Within media and cultural studies, influential work on media reception has challenged the notion of the passivity and vulnerability of audiences, positing critical, informed and transgressive users of media. 'Active audience' or 'social actor' discourses have gained ground in a number of disciplinary fields (Lash 1994; Livingstone 2007; Rutherford & Bittman 2007). Certain research paradigms, thus, lend support to neoliberal policy agendas, in their construction of a media-savvy, self-regulating subject—an empowered agent/consumer of transnational media services.

In the context of changing attitudes to public service values and the growing conceptualization of the media 'audience' as consumer, it is pertinent to ask how the Australian regulator has framed itself as an institution in this changing landscape of globalized media ownership and influence. In his institutional analysis of Australia's regulatory system and broadcast media policy,<sup>6</sup> Terry Flew (2006) argues that supervisory authorities are subject to what Robert Horwitz calls 'regulatory capture' (Horwitz 1989

<sup>2</sup> The *Communications Act* set out the statutory duties and responsibilities of *Ofcom* (Office of Communications), the 'super regulator', formed from the amalgamation of the UK's five legacy regulators (the Independent Television Commission, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Radio Authority, the Radio Communications Agency, and the Office of Telecommunications).

<sup>3</sup> Australia's *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992), sets out the roles and responsibilities of the *Australian Communications and Media Authority* (ACMA), (initially for its predecessor, the *Australian Broadcasting Authority* (ABA)). The *Act* mandates the conduct of research which monitors community standards and attitudes in areas of social demand: for example, notions of public decency and anxieties around child protection. The *Act* also warrants ACMA to implement the various television program standards—the *Children's Television Standards* (CTS) and the *Australian Content Standard*—which ACMA monitors in the 'co-regulatory' partnership with terrestrial and subscription television broadcasters. Australia's system provides an example of Livingstone et al.'s 'discursive governance'. The negotiation of industry codes and standards, rather than 'command and control' sanctions, is the cornerstone of Australia's 'co-regulatory' system.

<sup>4</sup> See also Keum et al. (2004); Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen (2005); Trentmann (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Compare ACMA's recent framing of itself as 'the Converged Regulator' (Chapman, C 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For Flew, analysis of institutions provides a means for understanding policy developments 'at a mid-range epistemological level' (2006, p. 282), as the product of social forces arising within national systems, as well as being shaped by more global elements. He argues that such analyses are particularly suited to tracing the 'deep structures of national broadcasting systems over historical time (2006, pp. 282-283), in Australia's mixed broadcasting system, where private and transnational corporations have considerable power to shape their own operating environments, but where their activities are also constrained by specific national legal, regulatory and policy environments.

cited in Flew 2006, p. 289), that is, that regulating agencies in time come to systematically favour the private interests of the bodies they regulate over questions of the public interest. Following analysts of the US and European media systems (Hoffmann-Reim 1996; McChesney 1992; Streeter 1995), Flew concludes that regulating institutions increasingly align themselves *discursively* with the broadcast industry's goals for operational success, and strategically, by supporting incumbent corporate interests at the expense of competing applicants or advocates for reform (Flew 2006, p. 286). Conversely, as he explains, due to the relative powerlessness of audiences to intervene against market imperatives, regulators will sometimes intervene on the part of particular sections of the community (such as children), often by supporting the ability of 'policy actors',<sup>7</sup> such as child advocates, to continue to participate in policy processes (p. 286).

### Policy Settlements in Australian Media Regulation

A mixed broadcasting system since the advent of television in 1956, Australian broadcasting has been shaped by the power of commercial media players. Public broadcasting has never been given the same economic and spectrum hegemony as the national broadcasters in Britain (until the mid nineteen-eighties). Australia has also, according to Flew, been served by regulatory agencies that are characterized by 'an overidentification' on the part of regulating agencies with the industry which they regulate. The regulatory capture resulted in recommendations at odds with governments' goals and discourses being rejected by the broadcast regulator (Flew 2003, 2006, pp. 290-1).

Public interest arguments for 'social demand' areas of content provision, such as Australian content and children's programming, have led to 'policy settlements' between governments, activists and commercial media interests, which Flew describes as:

a *quid pro quo* approach to broadcasting policy, whereby entry restrictions for potential new competitors are a *de facto* political trade-off for meeting [Australian content and children's] programming obligations (Thomas 2000; Flew 2002b, cited in Flew 2006, p. 292).

Thus, despite attempts on the part of the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s to promote neoliberal globalization initiatives and

economic reform, leading to a review of Australian broadcasting policy and the passage of the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992), the structure of Australian television remains largely the same. Despite government desires for a more competitive system to foster new technologies and services associated with convergence, the entrenched position of free-to-air broadcasters has suffered little challenge—antisiphoning laws, for example, created a barrier to the expansion of the Pay TV system.

### Neoliberal Ideology in Media Regulatory Discourse

Thus, while European analysts have critiqued the conflation of the competing concepts 'citizen' and 'consumer' in the policy discourse surrounding the introduction of the *Communications Act* (2003) in the United Kingdom, Australian scholars have identified the competition between neoliberal and social democratic frameworks in regulatory discourse. The former position argued for decentralization, the removal of barriers to new media players, and relaxation of foreign ownership laws, in order to enable fully competitive market to provide social benefits, such as the development of new technologies and services. This discourse is underpinned by a technological millenarianism: the argument that technological convergence, globalization of economic markets, and the availability of overseas media products to consumers via new media platforms, render national protectionist regimes untenable (Flew 2006, p. 296). The technological inevitability of regulatory change in new media futures is emphasized in ACMA's recent identification of itself as 'the Converged Regulator' (Chapman, C 2007). The 'policy settlement' outlined by communication policy researchers maintains the protectionist impetus of the *Children's Television Standards*, which have more in common with traditional public service, or social democratic, values. These social democratic values (Flew 2006; O'Regan & Goldsmith 2006) represent regulation as remediating structural disadvantages to children occasioned by the failure of the market to provide adequately for children's programming needs.

However the pressure of globalization and digitization is also increasingly constructed in institutional discourses as an irresistible rationale for requiring users, even child users, to become self-regulating. If the claims for 'regulatory capture' are correct, government and regulating institutions' public commitment to 'evidence based policy' (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2008) might need to

<sup>7</sup> Under the terms of the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992), ACMA is required to undertake research on community concerns, leading to regular reviews of its program standards in which submissions from interested parties, such as child advocates, are invited, alongside those from industry players. See, for example, Australian Communications and Media Authority (2007a).

be scrutinized, in that certain research paradigms tend to provide ‘evidence’ of the sort which more closely aligns with the concept of the ‘self-regulating’ child-consumer.

In the UK context, Livingstone et al. reflect on Ofcom’s world of consumers, including children and young people, who are constructed as ‘media-savvy individuals ... already competent agents in the world, ready to take responsibility for their own choices and actions’ (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007, p. 633). The concept of the agential consumer is in keeping with an important trajectory of research on young people and technology, which frames the ‘digital generation’ as supremely empowered, cognitively super-enabled to negotiate the world of transmedia texts and technologies, rather than the passive objects and victims of media effects (Buckingham 2006). While Livingstone et al. find little evidence that this research has had much impact outside the academy, our case study experience suggests that awareness of ‘active audience’ traditions in media research forms part of the knowledge base of the research and policy sectors of the Australian regulator. Such influence can be traced in the context of new media content—where traditional ‘command and control’ strategies are felt to be practically untenable and ‘media literacy’ is the preferred strategy for child protection (Buckingham et al. 2005; Livingstone 2002; Penman & Turnbull 2007)—but also in the context of more established electronic media.

## Case Study: Reviewing Research on Media Influences

### Background

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) was established on 1 July 2005 by the merger of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) and the Australian Communications Authority (ACA). While not fulfilling all the functions of the UK’s ‘super regulator’, it is apparent that the new Australian body looks to Ofcom for many of its institutional practices and epistemologies: many of the research studies commissioned by ACMA follow from and are in many respects modelled on similar studies previously commissioned in the UK context.<sup>8</sup> Like Ofcom, ACMA in its public promotions increas-

ingly defines itself as the ‘regulator of a converged, self-regulating market’ (Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007, p. 632). The discussion that follows outlines the research case study, exploring the way in which conflicting research paradigms came into play in the framing of the initial research brief, and the reception of the research findings. There are larger implications for researchers, particularly those from positivist social science disciplines interacting with institutional clients, for the wider dissemination, communication and policy impact of research in the context of Australian media ‘policy settlements’.

In late 2006, ACMA issued a request for tenders for two research undertakings, which, taken together comprised the ‘Media and Society’ research project, published in November 2007 as an integrated report (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2007b). This research complemented an earlier commissioned study of literature on the effects of TV advertising directed to children (Brand 2007), commissioned to inform the projected periodic review of the *Children’s Television Standards*. The first part of the Media and Society project was undertaken by market research company Keys Urbis; it involved a primarily quantitative study of media use in Australian families (electronic media, including new forms of ‘converged’ media devices) focusing on children and young people aged 8 to 17 years, with a smaller quantitative and qualitative study of attitudes towards media usage and of parental regulation. This ‘community research’ component was modelled on an early ABA study completed a decade earlier, *Families and Electronic Entertainment* (Cuppitt & Stockbridge 1996), and its brief was in line with ACMA’s statutory requirements under the provisions of the *Broadcasting Services Act* (1992).

The research case study I reflect on as a participant comprised the second part of the ‘Media and Society’ project, a review of research literature which aimed to provide a context for interpretation of data gathered in the ‘national research survey’. Its major brief was to establish the current state of knowledge in the academic research literature on the ‘long term psychological effect of the media on children, families and society’ (ACMA 2007, p. 209).<sup>9</sup> While this statement of intent may seem to favour a behavioural science approach, privileging empirical research, ACMA’s discourse in its calls for ‘Expressions of

<sup>8</sup> For example, the recent research reviews on media literacy, television advertising, and media effects.

<sup>9</sup> The author was part of an interdisciplinary consortium assembled by the Centre for Applied Research in Social Science (CARSS) at the University of New England, and the primary editor and author of several chapters in the final report. The consortium included (i) a specialist on children/young people, media content and the nature of regulation in Australia and internationally; (ii) a sociologist specializing in the study of the social effects of media, popular culture, style and personal identity; (iii) a criminologist specializing in youth, delinquency, risk-taking and gender; (iv) a sociologist specializing in the design and analysis of time-use diaries, and whose expertise included large scale studies of obesity and use of ICTs among children and young people; (v) two cognitive psychologists specializing in the role of genetic and environmental factors on children’s language development; (vi) paediatric researchers from the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Royal Children’s hospital, a world centre for the study of childhood health and obesity; and (vii) an educationalist specializing in children’s and adolescents’ multiliteracies.

Interest', and 'Request for Quotations' as part of the tender process, stressed its desire for interpretative social science and cultural studies research paradigms to be included in the 'knowledge' that was to be incorporated in the findings.

In addition, while the suggested model (exemplary for its 'balance' in the tender documents) was a study commissioned by Ofcom supported by other UK media institutions, *Harm and Offence in Media Content* (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone 2006), this study restricted its scope to media content, and the specific harms associated with content across a range of media (including print media). The UK model also prioritized empirical research. ACMA's proposed research extended this range to include usage as well as content, benefits as well as harms, and explicitly mandated consideration of the disciplines, such as media and cultural studies, whose research methods may gather their evidence via textual analysis as well as qualitative field-work. This additional (and perhaps supernumerary) focus on benefits and usage in expanding on a model already perceived as exemplary for its balance, is consistent with the institutional discourses of regulators discussed by Flew and Livingstone, which construct a self-regulating end-user of media content and platforms, capable of negotiating the possibilities and pitfalls of a converged mediascape in Australia's co-regulatory policy environment.

I now turn to a discussion of the process of communicating research findings in two areas of the review which were most clearly framed by the theories and methods of positivist social science: the behavioural psychological studies of television and violence, and the chapter on the influences of the media on children's health. While ACMA's brief invited openness to both cultural and interpretative social science traditions as well as positivist social science and public health traditions, difficulties with communicating the findings of the latter suggest that, an institutional preference exists for research from an 'active audience' paradigm.

Key epistemological and ontological assumptions framing ACMA's research brief manifest contradictions. The 'current state of academic knowledge' assumes a totality and consensus which are not sustained by a survey of debates even within individual academic disciplines. Moreover, the metanarrative of 'long term influences' and the foregrounding of key social anxieties associated with children's media use, such as 'cognitive impairment', 'aggression' and 'desensitization to violence', in the 'Statement of [Research] Requirements', presuppose the methodologies and epistemologies associated with positivist social science. In initial meetings with the client, strategic research managers articulated a desire for a rounded perspective not confined to the well-re-

hearsed 'cultural studies' critique of media effects. The success of the tender from our project team was attributed to ACMA's requirement for a broad, interdisciplinary range of expertise, covering psychology, sociology, media and cultural studies, education and public health. However, the narrative end-product of the research study, that is the research report as communication artefact, was also required to speak in an 'integrated voice', and to yield 'findings' (conclusions), not merely map the contours of the debate. It can be argued that the discursive framing of the 'report' genre, mapped onto a review of multidisciplinary review literatures inevitably forecloses on epistemological and ontological differences between disciplines and their bodies of 'knowledge'.

Further elements of the research brief as outlined in the 'Statement of Requirements', implied social constructivist, and/or interpretative social science approach. Themes such as 'user-generated content', 'users' media styles' not only flag the interest in new media platforms and applications (which lexically demand 'audiences' be understood as 'users'), but also invoke 'active audience' or 'social actor' theories of individual agency. These theories of the relationship of embodied users/audiences to media are suggestive of the figure of the self-regulating child. Communicating conclusions from positivist social science (psychology) and natural science (medical research) alongside those from interpretative social science and social constructivist research on education and culture poses particular ethical problems for researchers when 'integrated findings' are required. Often such reports employ a set of narrative strategies that rhetorically position the reader to privilege one or other of the contradictory perspectives on the risks and benefits posed by children's 'exposure to'/'use of' contemporary electronic media.

Why is an integrated voice such a problematic concept? Positivism as an epistemology aims to 'apply to methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond' (Bryman 2004, p. 11). It seeks to generate objective knowledge from empirical research methods that has a predictive power. Positivist approaches to children and media, with the preference for experimental and quantitative methodologies, are common in the sub-field of behavioural psychology. Interpretivism, in contrast, assumes that the role of the social sciences is to understand how human beings subjectively interpret the meanings of social action. Its heritage lies in Max Weber's notion of *Verstehen*: Weber described sociology as a 'science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action' (Bryman 2004, p. 13). The role of the social scientist is, thus, not to quantify laws, but to understand how human beings in specific contexts make sense of the social world. Bryman (2004, p.

13) links *Verstehen* with other interpretive social science approaches, such as symbolic interactionism, describing the differences between positivist and interpretive social science as a shift towards a foregrounding of a hermeneutic process.

In their ontological foregrounding of objectivity, positivist science and social science posit that social phenomena (such as media effects) have an existence that is not dependent on the hermeneutic processes of social actors (Bryman 2004, p. 16). In contrast, interpretive social science, together with some sub-fields of communication, cultural and education studies, embrace a constructionist ontology, positing that social phenomena and their meanings are not only produced through social action by human subjects, but are constantly being revised by them. In other words, researchers from these disciplines acknowledge that they can only present a specific version of social reality, one that is socially constructed, rather than one that is definitive (Bryman 2004, p. 17).

Bringing these oppositional epistemological and ontological positions together in a 'univocal' narrative in a review of research literatures is logically and narratively impossible. Commissioning institutions have often resolved disciplinary demarcation disputes by sourcing reviews of media effects from cultural studies or social psychological researchers, in whose work a social constructivist metanarrative prevails. These reviews employ the rhetorical strategy of presenting the findings of behavioural psychologists so as to position readers to question the validity of their methodology and/or epistemology, usually by questioning the researchers' subtlety in defining the basic 'categories' which are to be measured (eg what phenomena are to be counted as 'violence').<sup>10</sup> This strategy was not available to our team, given that our consortium was genuinely interdisciplinary. The chapter on the medical research on children and media was subcontracted to research associates from the Royal Children's Hospital/Murdoch Children's Research Institute, as a practically stand alone section of the report. Narratively 'backgrounding' positivist research was also inconsistent with our commissioned brief to canvass a broad range of fields and present findings most relevant to predicting 'long term effects' of media on children and families. Indeed, such a requirement implies the predictive power only warranted by positivist, or at least 'critical realist' (Bryman 2004, p. 12) ontological paradigms. (While this is not the major thrust of my concerns in this paper, the preferred solution to this narrative problem was to compartmentalize the differing research traditions, presenting each sub-area 'on its own terms' within thematic sections in chapters, which were, in turn, primarily organized

according to media. Thus, within a chapter on television, our decision was to present the psychological literature on violence as a separate sub-section. The discussion of effects of media on children's health was, however, presented as a separate chapter at the end of the report.)

My major concern here, however, is in the evidence for an institutional discourse within Australian regulatory culture that serves to privilege the 'active audience' or social constructivist epistemological traditions in research, while at the same time genuinely yearning for the surety or 'authority' of positivist paradigms that assume a predictive force which allows policy makers to generalize about the welfare of children. The desire for empirically 'proven' guarantees seems to inform the catch-cry common to many government bodies, the commitment to 'evidence-based policy' (Australian Communications and Media Authority 2008). Such 'authority', however, cannot easily be adduced from disciplines that claim that their findings are indeterminate, or applicable only to the specific, limited cultures under observation in a particular study context.

The participant experience of the editors of our case study report provides one kind of pure qualitative evidence for such institutional discourses. The regulatory bodies' revisions of the first draft of our study contained no critique of the methodologies of studies by cultural or education studies researchers which argued for the benefits of media usage by young people. On the other hand, over sixty revisions were requested to the subsection on the psychological literature concerning television and violence, and more than double that for the chapter on the influences of media on children's health. The latter chapter was sent back to the paediatric researchers on two separate occasions, at the request of ACMA staff, to check original sources for additional clarification, explanation of method, or to answer contestations of the medical researchers' findings.

One of the differences between the literature on media and violence, and that, for example, on media and obesity, is the almost total absence of competing research paradigms in medical research. Therefore, the kind of narrative framing which suggests provisionality or indeterminacy of findings is impossible. The editors of our study were able to explain and frame current findings in paediatric research only within a limited historical context: for example, that different topics had interested researchers in children's health some decades ago, while others, such as obesity, have only recently come into prominence.

The other major difficulty in communicating these results fairly while still acknowledging the commissioning body's anxieties lies in the adherence to risk-based models in epidemiological research. Most

<sup>10</sup> See Cumberbatch (2004); Griffiths (2000).

medical research uses correlation to establish 'risk factors' associated with particular medical conditions. These models do not guarantee causation, but they do function to allow individuals in the object world to make decisions that may affect their health outcomes. Thus smoking and overweight are 'risk factors' for heart disease. Snacking in front of the television is a 'risk factor' for consuming high-fat foods rather than fruit or vegetables. The most frequent discursive disagreement between the case study research team and ACMA staff, instantiated in all meetings and many comments on draft sections of the study, lies in the extent to which studies which demonstrate significant correlations — surveys or cross-sectional studies — yield valid evidence. The orthodoxy 'correlation does not equal causation' was repeated by many within the regulatory body. While this truism is supported by scientists as well, the latter do not further assume that studies which cannot supply definite proof of causation are necessarily poorly evidenced, or easily dismissed.

Further to this, identifying 'risk' and 'protective' social factors in children's social ecology, factors which might mediate 'harms' from media content, relies on evidence from studies which are representative. Only studies which have a large and representative sample can be generalized in order to suggest strategies to minimize risk. Such studies (longitudinal and/or cross-sectional in design) exclusively express their findings in terms of correlations. Institutional discourses which devalue research which cannot generate the absolute 'proof' of causation

require the impossible of researchers—warrants of infallibility—and therefore enable regulatory bodies to disown research which may be at odds with long-standing 'policy settlements' identified by communications researchers.

## Conclusion

Are disciplines involved in the study of children and media able to generate their own 'policy settlements' in order to communicate research that can offer some cross-disciplinary consensus? In a recent article Sonia Livingstone challenged positivist social scientists to publicly answer the many critics of the 'theoretical, epistemological and political underpinnings of "effects" research' (Livingstone 2007, p. 7). Our case study suggests that such reflexivity does not lie within the training of researchers in these areas, or conform to the ontological and epistemological foundations of their disciplines. If any challenge is to be made to the status quo, which supports neoliberal policy agendas, such a challenge must come from within the humanities or interpretative social sciences, whose training allows them to identify discourses and disciplinary warrants—the bases of knowledge claims across disciplines. The ethical challenge is to communicate the findings of positivist science and social science in ways which do not devalue them by narrative means and thus, do not unfairly represent either the robustness or limitations of this research.

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## About the Author

*Dr. Leonie Margaret Rutherford*

Dr. Leonie Rutherford (PhD, Australian National University) is a specialist in interdisciplinary childhood studies. She has an in-depth knowledge of the field of children's media regulation, media literacy, and social studies of youth and technology, together with relevant existing research on children's consumption of electronic

media and its effects. Her research and teaching resource publications have explored the links between public policy and advocacy, media regulation and the Australian children's television production industry.

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