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School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Discipline of Media

Masters Thesis

The Challenges of Regulating New Media Technologies for Children and Young People

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a comparative study of the classification and regulation of media content in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. These three countries were chosen due to their historical links, common language and similar problems.

The main purpose of this thesis is to ascertain why, and how, media content is regulated for children and young people, and whether regulation is working, given the easy access to new technologies. Further: can such media content, when viewed alone, be regulated?

In order to do this comparative study, a clarification of what new media technologies are is given and what is currently accepted to be the status of childhood. The thesis firstly investigates therefore, the present concept of childhood, how it compares with the past and why there is a need to make a special case for children. It examines the differences between adulthood and childhood and at adult-child relationships from the classical period to the present day. From the present study, it is apparent that, since the earliest recorded history of children, childhood has been seen as a formative time of life.

The thesis investigates the need for regulation of media content and compares, in contrast, how the free market has simply transferred responsibility of regulation from that of the government, to that of private corporations, and put the onus of ensuring that one's choices are informed, into the hands of the individual.

The current status of research on the effects of media influences on children and young people is examined. There is divided opinion on this matter which lies between what has been labelled by Egenfeldt-Nielsen and Smith (2003) as 'the 'active media perspective' and the 'active user perspective'. The former believes that causes of behaviour are external, whereas the latter believes that consumers are more than passive recipients of media and bring with them much contextual background.

Existing regulations of media content are examined from Australia, New Zealand and the UK. In all three countries there are regulatory bodies that implement various Broadcasting Acts and classification boards that classify films, videos, and other content.

Comparisons show that the UK and New Zealand regulation makes specific mention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child within their Broadcasting Code and Act respectively. Australia however, does not do so, but it does refer to it in the Broadcasting Act in respect to protecting children from 'distressing and harmful' material (The Attorney-General's Department 2000).

Three studies concerning the use of media by children and young people, undertaken in recent times by the three countries are compared. In particular the studies show that much time is taken up engaging with media technologies (over 4 hours per day in the UK and Australia). This is a considerable amount of time in a child's life and deserves due attention, especially considering the difficulty in regulating content.

It is found that the challenges of regulating the new media technologies arise mainly from the fact that governments are unable to legislate outside of national jurisdictions. While the governments of all three countries have made it illegal to publish restricted material, they are unable to prevent this material being published online overseas.

As an alternative to regulation, media literacy programmes are examined. These programmes provide education about how to stay safe online and to protect one's privacy and security online. It has been found that all three countries have produced various programmes.

From this study it is concluded that:

- An international approach, possibly auspiced through the United Nations, could prevent offensive and harmful material being published online;
- The Australian government can use the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to justify its filtering software on the Internet;

- The Australian government has begun to introduce a media literacy programme into schools but could include such programmes into the National Curriculum.

DECLARATION

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University or other Tertiary Institution to Marilyn Coleman and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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