Speaking out: research, public debate and policy

This article offers some reflections on the relationship between academic research, public debate and policy-making. It arises from my experience of researching children, young people and media, but several of the key points would apply to many other areas. It was first published in a more academic form in the journal Communication Review, and then in this form (with some different examples) in the Children's Media Yearbook, 2013.

In October 2012, the *Guardian* newspaper ran a front page story headlined 'Ban under-threes from watching television, says study'[1]. Based on a review of research published in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (a BMJ journal), it reported that doctors at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health were 'increasingly concerned' about the impact on television viewing on children's brain development. The author of the review was calling for a complete ban on 'screen time' for under-threes, rising gradually to a limit of two hours for those aged 16 and over – recommendations that go further than those apparently made in other countries, by bodies such as the American Academy of Paediatrics. The *Guardian* story was subsequently picked up by the BBC and a range of other media outlets; and I myself was interviewed for *Sky News*.

The author of the original review was not in fact an academic or a paediatrician but a well-known anti-television campaigner, Aric Sigman – the author of popular books such as *The Spoilt Generation* and *Remotely Controlled: How Television is Damaging Our Lives.* Sigman frequently claims that the only authorities who should be consulted on the question of children and television are doctors, although he himself is not a doctor: he has a PhD in psychology, although he is not a practising psychologist either. Nor indeed is he a researcher: he has never conducted his own research about children and television, or indeed any other media. His article for the *Archives of Disease in Childhood* consists of an extremely partial review of the available research, hardly any of which relates specifically to children under the age of three. It concentrates exclusively on psychological 'effects' research, and fails to mention (let alone address) the many theoretical and methodological challenges that have been made to these kinds of studies – although it does insinuate those who disagree with this view are merely in the pay of the television industry. Its concluding recommendations are, to say the least, unwarranted by the evidence that is reviewed.

This story is not untypical, but it raises some interesting questions about the nature of public debate about children and media. Why did such an apparently reputable academic journal – and its peer reviewers – accept such a partial and inadequate review by an author who is known, not as a medical practitioner or a researcher, but as a campaigner? Why did a serious newspaper like *The Guardian* give the story front-page coverage, and pay so little attention to those who challenged his views? On what basis should institutions like the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health issue recommendations to parents? And what can researchers who actually work in this area do to present a better informed perspective, and generate a more balanced and sensible public debate?

Like many academic researchers who work in this field, I receive frequent requests to respond to media enquiries. In the past few months, I have had numerous

requests of this kind. A news report about two fourteen-year-olds who made their own pornographic video led to an invitation from a mass-circulation daily newspaper to write an opinion piece about 'the sexualisation of childhood'. The murder of twelve people at the screening of the latest *Batman* movie in Aurora, Colorado prompted a request from a radio news channel for my views on the effects of media violence. Most recently, I was asked for my opinions about the impact of mobile phone 'apps': are they (and I quote) making us 'lazy and solipsistic' or do they 'open new avenues of life' and promote 'even faster brain processing'? Alongside this have been discussions with a documentary producer about the contribution of media and consumer culture to the phenomenon of 'nature deficit disorder' among children; a query about the effects of reading e-books on children's imagination and attention span; and a request for a radio interview about whether there should be age-based ratings for children's books like those for apparently more 'harmful' media such as film and video.

My response to these kinds of queries is, I confess, often ambivalent and conflicted. In fact, I frequently ignore or decline them – and yet I often feel guilty and even ashamed about doing so. Of course, some of these questions are ones that I am ill-equipped to answer, and on which little useful evidence is available – although that does not always appear to be a significant constraint for some of those who *do* choose to respond to them.

However, my avoidance of such queries primarily reflects my impatience with the terms in which the public debate about children and the media is typically defined. This is largely an either/or debate, about whether the media are 'good' or 'bad' for children. It is a debate that (as with some of my examples above) is often prompted by rare and spectacular events – yet these events are nevertheless frequently seen to be typical, or to tell us something much more broadly about the direction in which our society is heading. And it often leads on to a discussion about whether we should restrict or control children's access to media, or indeed the media themselves. Framing the debate in these terms focuses attention on a narrow range of phenomena, and seriously restricts what can possibly be said about them. Yet the ways in which this agenda is set in the wider public domain inevitably exert a significant influence on the formation of policy and, by extension, on the funding of further research.

Academics in the UK – and elsewhere – are increasingly urged to consider the question of *impact*. In applying for government research grants and in competing for funding under the Research Excellence Framework we are now required to identify 'pathways to impact' and to produce 'impact narratives' showing how our work has influenced policy and practice beyond the academy. We might question whether such an apparently aggressive term is well chosen: most of us would probably prefer the increasingly popular, and more dialogical, notion of 'public engagement'. However, most academics are surely concerned that their work will make a difference to the wider world; and the 'impact agenda' may provide a useful means of recognising and rewarding this.

Nevertheless, achieving, demonstrating and measuring impact is bound to be a complex matter. One significant difficulty here is that we have only limited opportunities, and limited power, to determine how our work will be represented in

the public domain. Most 'impact' is necessarily *mediated*. As such, the relationships between research, media coverage, public debate and policy-making, which are the focus of this article, are almost bound to prove difficult and troubling.

Three exhibits

The following three brief examples, taken from recent UK debates about children, young people and media, illustrate some of the ways in which academics *are* able to contribute to these discussions. They also point to some of the formidable difficulties we face in generating a more constructive public debate.

Susan Greenfield is Professor of Synaptic Pharmacology at Oxford University, and a former director of the Royal Institution. She is also a Baroness, an appointed member of the House of Lords. Over the past few years, Professor Greenfield has made a number of high-profile public statements about the effects of the internet and other digital media on children's brain development. The targets of her concern are fairly broad-ranging, as a sample of her many recent headlines suggests:

> *Facebook addicts can't relate, says scientist Susan Greenfield*
>
> *Texting 'could increase attention deficit disorders' says Baroness Greenfield*
>
> *Social websites harm children's brains: Chilling warning to parents from top neuroscientist*
>
> *Susan Greenfield: Computers may be altering our brains*[2]

Greenfield's claims are partly based on neuroscientific theories about the plasticity of the developing human brain; although she also claims that electronic media have caused a wider loss of 'empathy' within contemporary society, manifested in the apparent rise in violence, addiction, and so on. In 2011, controversy arose when Professor Greenfield claimed that the internet was responsible for the rise in childhood autism – a claim that clearly does not stand up to even the briefest critical interrogation. Greenfield's claims were publicly challenged by one of her academic colleagues, Professor Dorothy Bishop, an expert on autism, and by autism campaigners. In this case, as in others, Greenfield agreed (when pressed) that the evidence was limited; although she also asserted that the issue was so urgent that the lack of definitive evidence did not matter, and that action should be taken right away.[3]

David Starkey is a former Professor of History at the London School of Economics, and the author of numerous apparently definitive texts on British constitutional history. He is also a frequent media commentator. In August 2011, he appeared on the BBC's flagship news magazine programme *Newsnight* in a discussion of the rioting that had erupted in many UK cities earlier that week. Starkey argued that the riots were a result of the influence of black culture on white working-class young people, especially through media such as rap music:

> *What's happened is that a substantial section of the chavs… have become black. The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic, gangster culture has become the fashion… And this is why so many of us have this sense of [England as] literally a foreign country…*[4]

When questioned, Starkey was unable to name any examples or rap music, but he was by no means alone in pointing to the media as a cause of the riots. Commentary in the wake of these events frequently laid the blame on media as diverse as computer games, rap music, reality television, social networking sites and the advertising of designer clothing. Starkey is well known as a controversialist, but he is also an historian. In inviting him to contribute, the producers of *Newsnight* might perhaps have expected him to offer a considered historical perspective. Yet this was not what he provided; and his contribution raises significant questions about the uses and abuses of academic authority.

Dr. Linda Papadopoulos is a child psychologist who was commissioned by the UK government to produce an official report on the 'sexualisation of young people', which was published in 2010. The report arose in the context of a Home Office review of domestic violence against women, instigated by the then Labour Home Secretary Jacqui Smith; although Conservative politicians including Prime Minister David Cameron have also complained about the 'creepy sexualisation' of girls in music videos, fashion advertising, teenage magazines and other media. The incoming Conservative government subsequently commissioned a further report on this issue from Mr. Reg Bailey, the chief executive of the Mothers' Union (a Christian charity); Bailey's report, symptomatically entitled *Letting Children Be Children*, recommended a range of restrictions on media and marketing that are currently being followed through.

Dr. Papadopoulos is a practising clinical psychologist who is also employed at the University of North London. Her own research has been primarily in the field of dermatology. However, she is also a glamorous celebrity: she has appeared as the resident psychologist on *Big Brother*, and is regularly used as an 'expert' on breakfast television. She has also featured on programmes such as *Celebrity Mastermind* and *Celebrity Fit Club*. 'Dr. Linda' (as she prefers to be known in these contexts) also runs a private beauty consultancy for women, which markets its own range of beauty products.

Papadopoulos's report is dominated by psychological theories of media effects: there is no discussion of research using sociological or Cultural Studies perspectives, or of the many criticisms of media effects research[5]. Her statements to journalists typically align this account with a pathological view of contemporary young women:

> *It is a drip, drip effect. Look at porn stars, and look how an average girl now looks. It's seeped into every day: fake breasts, fuck-me shoes ... We are hypersexualising girls, telling them that their desirability relies on being desired. They want to please at any cost.*[6]

Predictably, the Papadopoulos report and the ensuing debate received wide media coverage, not least because it provided a pretext for the media to feature examples of the offending material: perhaps the most notable was the website of the *Daily Mail*

– a newspaper well known for its moral campaigning – which featured several raunchy images of the star Rihanna while simultaneously calling on the media regulator Ofcom to ban them.

Conditions of authority

As these examples suggest, debates about young people and the media are a constant concern for the media themselves. Behind the three I have discussed stand a legion of commentators, pundits and campaigners willing to recite their views about the harmful effects of the media, seemingly at any passing invitation. Aside from the lunatic fringe represented by Aric Sigman and members of the White Dot Society, they would include the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, whose views on the 'Disneyfication' of modern childhood have been widely cited; and the parenting 'expert' Sue Palmer, whose bestseller *Toxic Childhood: How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and What We Can Do About It* (2006) has set much of the agenda for contemporary discussion.

However, my three examples above are all academics. Of course, they might be disparaged as media celebrities: despite their readiness to blame the media, they are all exceptionally 'media-friendly'. Nevertheless, the first two at least are undoubtedly distinguished in their respective fields. They carry a degree of academic authority and gravitas, which is strongly endorsed by official bodies (the Royal Institution, the BBC, the government). They purport to present scientific evidence, and to embody the wisdom of disciplined scholarship. Paradoxically, the fact that none of them has any experience whatsoever in media research may be seen as an advantage: they all come from academic disciplines that are generally seen as more serious and legitimate than Media Studies – a field whose claims to authority are still widely vilified in the mainstream media.

As media researchers, we are of course inured to the phenomenon of 'blaming the media'. In different ways, my three examples all reflect the familiar characteristics of this approach: the media are regarded as a primary, if not exclusive, cause of very broad (and frequently ill-defined) social phenomena; they are seen to operate according to a simple cause-and-effect logic, in which audiences are merely passive victims of media manipulation; and these effects are routinely displaced onto *other* people (especially young people) who are deemed to be incompetent or dysfunctional consumers.

What is particularly notable is how the concept of *childhood* is invoked in these debates. For campaigners, childhood provides a valuable 'hot button', a convenient symbol that helps to focus much broader fears and aspirations about social change. Framing the issue in generational terms typically invokes generalisations about childhood: the child is defined in sentimental terms, either as helpless and vulnerable or as exotic and spontaneously competent. Framing the relationship in terms of *effects* necessarily implies a concept of causality, in which the media are seen as an external force, impacting upon children's lives from outside. The issue of children's relationships with media is thus typically framed in either/or terms, in which the media are either 'good' or 'bad' for them – an approach which precludes the asking of other questions, not least about how children themselves understand these issues.

These particular ways of framing the topic lead inexorably to proposals at the level of public policy that verge on the absurd, as though we could isolate the bad elements and remove them, leaving only the good. In the wake of the UK riots, for example, it was seriously suggested that the police should 'turn off the internet' in order to prevent young people collecting on the streets; while the debate about sexualisation has led to the proposal for 100-metre exclusion zones around schools, from which 'sexualised' imagery would be banned.

As media researchers, we know that generations of scholars have shown the role of the media in society to be significantly more diverse and complex than this. Yet in the public debate, the *persistence* of media-blaming and of simplistic assertions about media effects is undeniable. However much we may wearily insist that 'it's much more complicated than that', the debate continues to be framed in terms of assertions that, on the contrary, it is actually very simple indeed.

Terms of engagement

In this situation, it is often hard to imagine how academic research might make a more effective contribution to public knowledge. Yet this is surely a vital question – not least because the public debate itself plays a significant role in setting the agenda for policy and (whether we like it or not) for academic work itself. In the field of science communication, there has been a significant shift in recent years from the notion of 'public understanding of science' to that of 'public engagement with science': this new perspective moves beyond the deficit model of a passive, ignorant public that is in need of being informed by scientific experts, towards a greater emphasis on dialogue. Yet when it comes to social science, the relations between public knowledge, evidence and policy are likely to be more complex and contested. Compared with natural scientists, the authority of social scientific 'experts' is inevitably more open to question, both within and beyond their own disciplines. Furthermore, the topics on which social scientists work tend to be much closer to people's everyday experience. Arguably, we are not all equally entitled to express an opinion about quantum mechanics or global warming, or at least judged to be equally credible if we attempt to do so; whereas it would seem that anybody – from the Archbishop of Canterbury to your local taxi-driver – is equally entitled to hold a view about whether television or computer games are good or bad for children.

This can result in a widespread suspicion amongst academics about the value of media engagement. Such engagement is often perceived to entail a form of 'popularisation' or even 'vulgarisation'; and those colleagues who do pursue it are sometimes condemned as 'media whores'. This condemnation also extends to academics who are busily using social media: academic twittering and social networking are often ridiculed as merely forms of self-promotion. These complaints are not without justification in some cases: academic self-publicists risk fatally undermining their own legitimacy, to the point where even mainstream media may come to see them as unworthy of being taken seriously.

Of course, it might seem quite utopian to expect that the media might *ever* function as a rational 'public sphere', a realm of pure communication in which scientific

evidence could be transparently represented. As media academics, we should know better than to expect that nuanced, qualified accounts of the complex, multi-factorial nature of media influence are somehow going to make the headlines. Yet however much we may distrust simplistic media coverage, our managers and employers may feel that there is rarely such a thing as bad publicity. There are certainly instances where university press offices' attempts to publicise particular instances of research have resulted in inaccurate forms of media 'spin', in which academics themselves have occasionally been complicit.[7]

Finally, there is the question of how such debates feed into policy. The notion of 'evidence-based policy' assumes that evidence is an unproblematic phenomenon, and that it can simply be accumulated, like picking apples from a tree; and it belies the fact that policy-making has its own dynamics, which are subject to much wider forces. The debate around the 'sexualisation of childhood' (discussed above) provides many instances of this, as did my own experience of leading a parallel UK government review of 'the impact of the commercial world on children's wellbeing'.[8] Far from pursuing 'evidence-based policy', my abiding impression was that politicians were themselves highly subject to the vicissitudes of media coverage: rather than setting the terms of debate, they were often improvising in response to emerging expressions of 'public opinion', as articulated by the right-wing press – a situation that is paradoxical in light of the continuing decline in newspaper circulation.

Conclusion

I have written this article partly as a provocation to further debate among the research community; although it is probably clear that I am having some kind of debate with myself. As researchers, I feel we should be doing a better job in communicating our research to the wider public. Yet I am weary of working in a situation where the terms of debate are predefined in ways that are exasperatingly narrow, and where there are such powerful constraints on what can possibly be said. In an age of 'social media', we might expect this to be getting easier, as we are able to exercise greater control over the channels and means of communication that we use – although as we become merely another voice amid the babble of online discussion, it seems much more likely that academic authority and credibility will be further undermined.

David Buckingham
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NOTES

[1] See http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/oct/09/ban-under-threes-watching-television. Sigman's review was published as 'Time for a view on screen time', *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 8th October 2012, archdischild-2012-302196.

[2] These headlines are from: *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 9th 2010; *Daily Telegraph* 12th August 2009; *Daily Mail* 24th February 2009; *Independent* 12th August 2011.
[3] For further details on this debate, see: http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/aug/06/research-autism-internet-susan-greenfield.
[4] Starkey's contribution is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gU5TcTSa9kk.
[5] The report is available online at: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/sexualisation-young-people.html. Papadopoulos's own site is www.drlinda.com.
[6] This quotation comes from *The Guardian*, 25th February 2011.
[7] In late 2011 I appeared, alongside Professor Susan Greenfield, in an edition of BBC Radio 4's *The Media Show*, which discussed some interesting instances of this: this programme (tx. 28th December 2011) is still available at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b018gqzy.
[8] The report is online at: https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00669-2009.