Losing sight of the ball?:
Children, media and the environment in a video research project

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About this document

This was a paper presented at the International Broadcasting Symposium, University of Manchester, in 1998. It is based on material in the book, *Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power* (John Libbey Media, 1997), which I was invited to the Symposium to discuss. Interested readers are obviously encouraged to see the book for much fuller discussion of the study.

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- For information on this and other work and projects, see **www.theory.org.uk/david**.
- For information on further explorations of using visual media production as part of a research methodology, see **www.artlab.org.uk**.

Introduction

This paper discusses a qualitative and broadly ethnographic study in which groups of schoolchildren aged between seven and eleven were shadowed (and superficially supervised) by the researcher as they recorded videos, using camcorder equipment, on the subject of 'the environment'. The findings of this project, introduced in the second part of the paper, are seen to provide a forum in which children themselves gain the opportunity to refute the picture of children painted by much psychological research on children and the media, which is seen in the first part of this paper to have traditionally portrayed children as inadequate and passive in the face of the all-powerful screen media. It also suggests that 'global' issues, whether in terms of the media or the environment, are those which children are less aware of, and that this should be borne in mind during discussions of youth and global media.

The powerless children of media research

The notion of childhood as a social construction is by now a familiar tenet of sociology, supported by the historical evidence which suggests that adolescence is a wholly new category, whilst the category of general childhood barely existed in the middle ages, emerging somewhat in the sixteenth century, but being seen as a much shorter period than we regard it today right to the end of the nineteenth (Ariés, 1962). Social needs, concerns, and the availability of leisure have meant that childhood has been variously defined at different points in time, and across different cultures. The discipline of psychology, however, whilst recognising its own 'science' as new, has a greater tendency to take its own views of the individual child as universal. Piaget's highly influential developmental theory, for example (e.g. Piaget 1926, 1929) – commonly criticised for specifics, but respected as a general model – has the child making a rational and linear journey from

immature, inadequate childhood to logical, competent adulthood. This hierarchically-arranged model, as Chris Jenks (1996) has observed, 'sets a narrative in the discourse of cognitive growth that is by now global and overwhelming' (p. 24). The progression through the stages is characterised by an 'achievement ethic' (*ibid*). Play, for example, is seen as a trivial fantasy activity which must be shed on the route to sensible maturity (Jenks, 1982). Piaget did not necessarily *create* a trend of undervaluing children's own expressions and experience, but he certainly gave this approach its foundations.

Children are the 'other' group, who do not have the specific type of rationality which is equated with adulthood, but who – as in most learning theories – must progress through stages to achieve it. Children are understood rather more as non-adults than they are as young human beings. Thus negatively defined, they become empty or wrongly-filled vessels, who will only complete the long voyage to maturity by adopting a particular set of 'adult' values, perspectives, and models of behaviour.

In the following sections I will discuss some of the history of how children have been deployed in media and other research, and consider the implications of the conflicting paradigm approaches.

Psychologists and 'children'

When used in public debates like this, 'children' becomes a term which is far from being a transparent description of the section of a population under a certain age. Politicians and psychologists like to use it to denote a particularly susceptible and vulnerable group of sub-humans who cannot speak for themselves, in any sense; sociologists (and, for their own purposes, some broadcasters) more commonly take the view of 'youth' as a group whose own views, whilst coherent and strong, are ignored by the society which would not only prefer to speak for them, but also give accounts of their very motivations and action on their behalf. This latter perspective prioritises the 'macro' and structural approach to social problems, so that in the case of media effects the main question is not 'Might one child be at all damaged by media exposure?', but rather, 'Does it make sense to focus on the media when seeking the causes of the "social problems" with which children are associated?'.

One of the several problems with the cause–effect model, still adhered to by many psychologists, is that it strips away all else in its narrow focus on – as David Buckingham has put it – 'the isolated encounter between the individual child and the all-powerful screen that characterises a great deal of academic research' (1993b, p. 19). The notion of the passive child audience disables the possibilities for understanding children's uses of and interactions with the media. 'How children use television, for example, and how they talk about what they watch, need to be considered as social acts with social functions and purposes' (*ibid*). This 'angle' of study would be quite invisible from within the 'effects' paradigm, which takes little interest in children's motivations, and indeed barely credits them with the capacity to make choices at all.

The different approaches to children within academic literature are dissected in detail by Christine Griffin in her imaginatively-conceived critique, *Representations of Youth* (1993), which identifies a range of cases where clearly social problems, such as unemployment, teenage rebelliousness and delinquency, are reduced by psychologists to individualistic explanations involving 'character traits'. In such work, as in studies of the media's social effects, social life is made explainable by deliberately ignoring all that is social; however, by isolating the individual from the context which we might hope would shed light upon their plight, such work produces 'findings' which are worse than useless.

The child as active viewer

Griffin's work interestingly illuminates the discussion of contemporary approaches to the media, since the same psychological approach has become a notable force in media effects debates, and has roots in other disciplines, as well as popular thought. As Anderson & Lorch (1983) have noted, there is an implicit theory in much writing on the nature of television viewing, which presumes that 'visual attention to television is fundamentally reactive and passively controlled by superficial nonmeaningful characteristics of the medium' (p. 3). In other words, children are inadequate viewers who do not watch television for any meanings or experiences which might exercise their minds, but simply because they cannot resist the attractive flow of its images. However, more recent research based on the more positive model of the 'active viewer' has revealed the flaws of the former approach, noting that children are able to distinguish between different types of programming, take in information even when engaged in other activities, and are generally literate and discriminating in their media usage.

It is interesting that what we might in lay terms understand as the more 'psychological' dimension of television viewing – the way in which content is processed and interpreted by the viewer – is almost precisely the area which conspicuous psychologists in this field have generally failed to address in a manner of any quality. This can perhaps be related to the interest which psychology as a discipline – through its representatives – has in reinforcing its self-image as a 'science', relying on quantitative methods which focus on measurable *outcomes*, rather than *processes*.

Children's capacities have often been underestimated by media (and other) research. Almost always 'researched on' rather than 'worked with', children are constructed – by psychologists in particular – as inadequate and uncritical in their encounters with the mass media, which itself is misrepresented as forbiddingly powerful. These non-adults are treated sympathetically, as victims – they know not what they do – but are simultaneously disempowered from having any participation in the discourses about themselves, their behaviour, and the reasoning linking the two. For obvious reasons, the research method described in the following section aims to avoid those mistakes.

The video production method

This study sought to gain an understanding of children's perceptions of the environment, and how these may have been influenced by television material related to environmental issues, by getting school children to make videos about 'the environment' themselves. Seven different videos on this subject were made at seven different schools in Leeds, with groups of around seven or eight children, over the course of several weekly sessions. (Some details of the schools and the groups appear in the section below this). Here, the process which each of the groups went through is outlined.

In the first week, the children were introduced to the researcher (myself), who then led a group discussion which explored what the children understood by the term 'the environment', what came to mind in relation to 'environmental issues' and 'environmental problems', and where they had learned about these subjects – their sources of information. Picture cards were passed around the group, each suggesting a particular environmental concern – such as industrial pollution, litter, deforestation, recycling, nuclear power, acid rain, the ozone layer – to see if the children recognised and could comment on those subjects. The children were also asked about their level of interest in, and *concern* about, these issues. The discussion then focused on television in particular, and the children's recall of environmental material from that source. The group would then be told that they would be making a video about 'the environment', under the supervision of the researcher, over the course of the following weeks. Some discussion of ideas for the video would follow, and the children were shown how to work the video camera, and each had a turn at filming

and performing for the camera. Suggestions of material for inclusion in the video came from the children, and were not proposed by the researcher.

Over the following weeks, once the children had got used to using the camera (which they all did very quickly), the video was produced[1]. (The scope of what could be filmed varied from school to school, depending upon the extent to which the children were allowed to leave the school grounds, and other such constraints upon available locations). The filming and presenting roles were continuously rotated so that each of the children had opportunities to work on both sides of the camera. In the final week of production, the children were encouraged to interview each other, on camera, about the experience of making the video, as well as their feelings about the environment more generally. This footage served multiple purposes, providing interesting material for inclusion in the edited video – whether as a 'talking head' or as an audio track to accompany other shots of the subject in question – as well as being valuable for research purposes, highlighting the children's concerns at the end of the several weeks of video work, both through the questions asked and answers given. The production activity with each group was observed closely[2].

The children and the schools

All of the schools involved in this study were in the city of Leeds, the commercial, industrial and financial centre of West Yorkshire in the North of England. The fourth largest city in Britain, Leeds has a resident multi-ethnic population of over 705,000. Five of the seven schools were within one and a half miles of the city centre. The city's Asian population, of 25,000 people, predominantly reside in inner-city areas which include those around these schools.

The general pupil population of four of the schools would be described as working class; two other schools had a mix of working and lower middle class children; and one school, located in suburban Far Headingley, had a notably white middle-class population. These labels are obviously crude, and this particular range of schools was not intended to represent schools in Leeds, or elsewhere, more generally. The school populations do differ sufficiently, however, for comparisons to be made.

The children generally worked in groups of seven or eight, for around two hours a week for five or six weeks[3]. The overall age range of children in the study was seven to eleven, with an average age of just less than nine and a half years old. This age group was selected for a number of reasons. Much of the published material on making videos of any substance with children involves those in their teenage years, and it was felt that it would be more interesting to test the capacities of younger children. Such findings could also be compared more directly with those of the psychological and effects studies which seem to credit children with few constructive capabilities, and also tend to involve younger children. On the other hand, the research had to exclude children *so* young that we could not expect them to have seen a variety of television material about the environment, or who could not reasonably be expected to do anything meaningful with a video camera. Children aged seven to eleven were therefore ideal, and are an age group whose media interests have been less fully researched, even though it is the period in which children watch most television (Buckingham, 1993, p. 34).

The video method: sociological foundations

The method borrows from ethnography an appreciation that the meanings which the media and the environment had for the children would be much better understood by spending the time with them as they make their videos, than they would be, for example, by the researcher making a singular visit to record interviews, or hand out questionnaires. Of course the adult investigator can never claim to have become a 'full member' of the community of children, or profess to have come to fully understand that culture; and an interested teacher, spending every day with the

children, could have a much closer idea of their 'true' feelings and beliefs about issues such as the environment than a researcher visiting just once a week.

It is clear that ethnographic methods have insights to offer media research which have not yet been fully exploited. Whilst David Morley's focus group study of audience responses to *Nationwide* (1980) is rightly well-recognised as having 'opened the route to the "ethnographic" approach to the audience', as Colin Sparks puts it (1996, p. 93), the tradition which it has spawned – whilst often estimable qualitative work – is 'ethnography' only the broadest of senses. Burgess & Harrison (1993) have noted that the term is often misused in media research, being applied to studies which fail to spend any length of time with the communities under study. Indeed, in his book *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Shaun Moores (1993) is forced to note that:

> 'With few exceptions, the studies I will be discussing in [this book] have relied mainly on audio-taped conversations with viewers, listeners and readers which may not last much more than an hour each' (p. 4).

In his own lucid discussion of ethnography as a method for understanding television audiences, David Morley (1992) argues, as does his sometime collaborator Roger Silverstone (1994), that the study of television is the study of everyday life. Television is so integrated with the rest of experience that one cannot be studied in isolation from the other. A paralysis has developed in the field, however, given that watching people watching television – however intensively or protractedly – tells the researcher remarkably little, whilst the task of including the broader contexts of daily life, as Ien Ang (1996, pp. 66–81) has noted, is theoretically limitless and therefore practically impossible. Whilst scholars such as Morley and Silverstone are obviously right that television is indeed deeply embedded in viewers' lives, this seems to have led to a situation where media ethnography has stalled even before it really got started. The methodology is exhorted in absurdly protracted theoretical texts – often arguing rather basic points – but not actually done, to any analogous extent, in practice (see Silverstone, 1994).

Apparently unable to imagine new methods or approaches, media audience researchers have increasingly been overcome, according to Ang, with 'a sense of crisis' (1996, p. 66). However, it is not as though any amount of substantial ethnographic work has ever been produced on media audiences, although Patricia Palmer (1986), Ann Gray (1992), and Marie Gillespie (1995) have all made important contributions. Ethnographic methods do not lack *potential*, and if a whole body of academics are truly caught in a kind of postmodern paralysis as Ang suggests, they could hardly be accused of wanton adventurousness in research. Ethnography may not always be able to record all of the social contexts relevant to media uses and interpretations, but it beats any other methodological school at producing insights from which further theory may spring.

How it works: Video production providing reflections on media readings and influence

It should be made clear that the video production process is used in this study as an *alternative* way of studying children's media consumption and readings. Since most audience studies purport to be analysing the relationship between media product and media readings, it might be argued that the present study 'skips' the exploration of the latter stage, jumping straight on to a third stage, of children's media production. However, this would be to miss the point that any of the studies which consider 'media consumption' do in fact use another kind of *production* as their starting-point – that of the talk or written responses produced by research participants in focus groups or interviews. Video production, in this sense, is not meant to be considered as a 'third stage', any more than the production of talk about media consumption is in other studies; and video production is taken to tell us something about the 'second stage' – the audience's readings of the media which they consume – in much the same way as other studies assume that they are able to.

At the same time, the video productions are taken to present rather more revealing and carefully-considered reflections of the influence of this process. In other words, for a subject where the audience have received most of their input on the subject from the mass media, as it was established was the case with the environment and children in this study, then the videos which they produce can be assumed to reflect their understanding of which issues and angles are the most pertinent and pressing; and this can be presumed to have been influenced by the media. Of course, in areas where the audience encountered discourses on the subject in question from a range of sources, or could be expected to be in a position to readily challenge claims and forms of presentation in the mass media, it would be much more difficult to make such assumptions. With children and the environment, however, where the mass media could be distinguished quite clearly as the primary information source, and where the children were (relatively) free to include in their video whatever materials and emphases they felt to be appropriate, the video production process could be studied as the indicator of important elements which the children, as media consumers, had taken on board from television and other media.

Advantages of the video production method in summary

As in other ethnographic methods, the amount of time spent with the participants means that the researcher is able to access talk about the issues under investigation which is more likely to be representative of their deeper feelings about a subject than the 'staged' discourse produced in one-off interview or focus group settings. The video camera and brief to make a particular kind of film, however, structures the use of that time, and gives participants an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of discourses relevant to the subject in question. Observation of every aspect of the process of producing the video provides one substantial block of research data, but at the end of the project we also have the videos thus produced – constructed, mediated accounts of a selection of the perceptions of the social world held by the group members. Combined with the understanding of the circumstances in which these came to be put onto videotape, gained in the time spent 'immersed' with each group throughout production, the videos themselves provide a companion block of data for analysis.

The method may also have benefits for the children involved as well, serving as a form of media education, potentially empowering them about the issues in question, and giving young people a way of expressing themselves which is generally found to be novel, exciting and unusual. Perhaps most importantly, the method constitutes a real break from those investigations of media use and impact which have confined the participants' responses to those available within a predetermined range. Whilst effects studies have traditionally based their approaches on a 'seek and you shall find' model, the video project researcher celebrates their own inability to predict what will happen – a 'risk' worth taking.

Some conclusions

There is not room in this paper for description, discussion and analysis of the completed videos (for this, see Gauntlett 1997). In this conclusion the more straightforward findings are followed by some theoretical consideration of their implications, and discussion of the methodology in that light. Unsurprisingly, it is found that more complex approaches produce much less simplistic answers.

Basic findings

Clearly, the 'findings' of an interpretative and ethnographic qualitative study such as this cannot be presented as straightforwardly as those for a simple survey. The complete study presents detailed observations, and extrapolated arguments. To reduce these to a simple list of 'findings'

would be counterproductive, and would contradict my argument that information about people's use of the media should be collected and handled sensitively, and not reduced to the level of the studies which I have criticised elsewhere for their maladroit simplicity and platitudinous accounts. Nevertheless, we can record some basic observations about the responses of the 53 children involved in this study. The sample is small, and not necessarily representative, but their attitudes to the environment have, at least, been explored in sufficient depth for us to be confident about the reliability of these points.

Children's media literacy

The most obvious and clear-cut finding of the study is that the children demonstrated a high level of media literacy in all age groups. Making a video came naturally to them. In their few years of experience as media *consumers* the children – some as young as seven – had learned elements of genre and presentation, as well as acquiring a lively awareness of the way in which things could be represented and misrepresented on camera[4]. The children's familiarity with the constructedness of the media, their ability to conceive of the final text even as they recorded elements of it out of sequence, and the sheer speed with which they picked up how to operate the equipment and began creative activity, are all parts of the whole range of ethnographic findings which further convince this author that the effects paradigm can be cast aside as incapable of providing us with sensitive and pertinent understandings of the role of the media in the formation of consciousness. The study also shows powerfully that a methodology which avoids the patronising, positivistic stance of the psychology-based effects tradition, and allows children to show their intelligence and discretion in relation to the media, can transform the kind of conclusions which must be drawn.

Environmental concerns

The children generally demonstrated a reasonably high level of concern about environmental issues, particularly pollution and the need for green, open spaces. Whilst the children were very adept at producing slogans of the 'save the planet – it's up to you' variety, as well as some more heartfelt pleas – such as 'why are they doing this to our world?' – their actual everyday behaviour in many cases, as they came to admit, was not entirely consistent with these eco-friendly views. Nevertheless, this fact was recognised with some embarrassment, and the commitment of many of the children to basic activities such as recycling is not to be denied.

The children related to environmental issues most closely at the local level, although some global extrapolations were made. However, the children did not focus on global issues primarily in their videos. Even at the level of their own individual actions, conflicts were observed between the idealistic desire to be environmentally friendly, and the more pragmatic or hedonistic pull of enjoying themselves and not bothering.

Social class did not seem to be a predictor of interest in or concern about the environment, although the middle-class children may have had slightly more detailed *knowledge* about certain areas. The older working-class children were more likely to engage in challenging debate, between themselves, about levels of purported concern and actual environmental behaviour, and inconsistencies therein, than the middle-class children of the same age, whose politeness in relation to such fundamental points could be read as apathy.

Age was also related to *knowledge* about environmental issues, in the obvious sense that the older children would have experienced more information-providing material, whether at school, through the media, or other sources, than their younger counterparts, and could be expected to have a greater capacity to understand complex issues. However, the younger children were if anything slightly more *enthusiastic* in their expressions of environmental concern, and about the video project itself. The younger children also seemed just as capable of dealing with ecological

concepts, such as the holistic worldview which recognises an integrated continuum between humans and nature.

Gender seemed to be generally unrelated to levels of environmental knowledge or concern. However, confident and engaging speakers on the subject were somewhat more likely to be found amongst the girls. Any indifference to the project shown by boys can only be attributed to the effect of gendered perceptions – in which ecological sympathies are associated with femininity – for a very small percentage of the older boys. If anything, the extent to which boys in the study *were* willing to express environmental concern was surprising.

The influence of television on perception of environmental matters

Again, the theory underlying this study means that it is almost *necessarily* impossible to simply describe a recorded effect 'x' of size 'y'. Rather, analysis of the children's videos suggests some conclusions about the nature of the influence of television's depiction of environmental problems on the way in which children seem to understand those issues, and consequently approach and re-present them in their own video productions.

Environmental paralysis

The conflicting messages from mass media coverage of the environment seem to have produced, if anything, a kind of paralysis. The pro-environmental activities which children are encouraged to participate in are small-scale, and so readily appear cosmetic and meaningless when the problems are put in a global context. Major environmental revolution, at the same time, is so profoundly unlikely that it is not even discussed. These confusions are further confounded when the media gives children a powerful potential role as planetary saviours on the one hand, emphasising the power of 'the kids' more unconvincingly than punks ever did, whilst children are still disenfranchised in much of the rest of social life and even, it could be said, within that patronising discourse itself.

Any element of pro-environmental inspiration is, then, quashed by a dampening force of at least equal power. Even the middle-class children in this study, whom we might expect to be more taken with the possibilities for bringing about change themselves, since they have greater realistic scope for seeing themselves as those 'in charge' in future years, seemed to feel as fundamentally powerless as any of the other children.

The hegemonic bending of environmental problem interpretations

Analysis of the videos produced in this study showed that the children's accounts of environmental damage and its solutions placed individual actions at their centre, rather than identifying institutions or social structures as the focus for causes, and change. Environmental problems were seen as due more to the carelessness and apathy of individual adults, and some children, rather than being a consequence of organised adult activity. An examination of environmental programmes (also in Gauntlett 1997) showed that this was also the perspective suggested most commonly on television – problems caused by forgetful or ill-advised adults, to be solved by minor reforms and the individual environmentally-responsible actions of the public.

Whilst it would be too simplistic to infer that the children's approach to environmental matters has been brought in wholesale from television, we do know from the interviews conducted in the first week of working with a group, that the children considered television to be a primary source of environmental information. It is therefore reasonable to argue that children's perception of environmental matters has been influenced by television in a particular way[5]. Their understanding of the agents relevant to environmental problems has been 'hegemonically bent', *away* from

structural and societal explanations and towards personalised, individualistic accounts. Therefore the children *do know* about environmental issues – it is not that the subject has been kept from them. However, the characteristics of the way in which that material has been relayed to them – via programmes which cannot be too contentious even on an important subject, and which aim to be reasonably reassuring for children, and to convince young viewers that they can make a difference – has led to a particular interpretation of the problems being conveyed. Environmental damage is thus domesticated and individualised, and opposition to it is similarly disengaged from effectively focused action. At the same time, a degree of 'oppositional' action – at this individualised level – is *incorporated* into the media world, with programmes (notably *Blue Peter*, but also less regular series such as ITV's *Go Wild!*) encouraging viewers to participate in environmentally-friendly schemes. Whilst apparently challenging on the one hand, this situation means that young viewers may feel that they are both well-informed and doing something about environmental matters, without being aware that these interpretations are, at least, partial and questionable.

The hegemonic bending of environmental coverage is not to be seen as a deliberate plan devised by broadcasters to protect the status quo: this is not a conspiracy theory. Rather, it is the consequence of a range of forces and choices – including the idea that children should be assured that they can do something about the problems, and the unspoken requirement that 'political' content should be avoided – which are part of the professional socialisation of journalists, broadcasters and producers, and implicitly prescribed by their normative working parameters. Whilst their presentations are generally informed by liberal values and are not intended to be conservative, their focus on the power or weakness of separate bricks, as it were, prevents children seeing the size and shape of the whole house.

Creative data: The video method in review

Unlike the psychological studies which I have criticised above and elsewhere (Gauntlett 1995a, 1997, 1998) – where the researcher would define the variables and parameters of the study in advance, and should normally be able to guess the results – the latitude and flexibility offered by this study meant that the researcher, frankly, had no idea what might be produced in the way of data, and almost necessarily had no expectations as to the outcome.

The findings more than bore out the assumption that the extended time spent with the groups, centred around the activity of making a video, would produce a greater level of understanding about their actual feelings regarding the environment. In several cases, it was found that the impressions generated in the first week's group interviews – the equivalent of the focus group that is the beginning and end of many 'qualitative' studies – were inaccurate to say the least, with some being distinctly misleading. Children who had seemed indifferent to the environment in conversation were found to have quite strong views on some issues (particularly where related to the quality of their own lives), whilst others who had emerged from the focus group as keen environmentalists were found to be rather less committed where significant amounts of actual effort would be required. Over time it also became clear that the children were more familiar with environmentalist values and discourses than had been initially apparent.

These research findings are not a matter of having 'caught out' the participants, but rather that those young people were ultimately able to present and specify their particular concerns once they had become comfortable with the research situation. The initial group interviews represented a kind of 'brain dump' of *potential* interests and concerns, which in subsequent weeks were sifted and filtered to reveal the more genuinely-felt opinions. The video-making process also gave the children a voice not only to provide considered answers, but to set their own questions. They were even able to use the persuasive vehicles of humour and satire to make their points. With childhood being traditionally seen both in society and in sociology as a time of limitation and constraint (Jenks, 1996), it is important to give child 'subjects' the opportunity to demonstrate creativity and

transcendence over such prescribed roles. In terms of media literacy alone, the method gave children a unique key with which to break apart traditional expectations, and demonstrate their wit and discrimination in media use.

Methods, meanings and 'bent' interpretations

Whilst it is well recognised in the social sciences that methodology can affect research results in a variety of ways, there can be few areas where method has had such a deterministic impact upon the understanding of an area as in the case of media effects. Different research approaches have not produced disparate perspectives upon similar findings, but rather have provided different answers altogether. Whilst the effects tradition represents a substantial proportion of previous media research, and would favour methods and modes of explanation which differ markedly from those of the present study, we are now able to draw attention to a catalogue of deficiencies in the paradigm which, taken together, terminally weaken the claims made by those studies. Furthermore, whilst the consideration of influences on perception of social issues will always necessarily be complex and somewhat equivocal, this study can claim to have a more sound basis for its findings than many simpler projects because it established the nature and intentions of relevant mass media content prior to making inferences about its consequences; because it found that such media was of importance to children's perception of the issues; and because of the extended and reasonably intensive time spent with research participants in an issue-focused activity.

This analysis has suggested that media coverage of environmental issues may have had the subtle but significant effect of stimulating children's perceptions of the causes and solutions to ecological problems in a way which counteracts serious challenges and is functional for maintenance of the status quo. The issues have not been disregarded or buried, but rather have received a treatment which has bent the flow of critique into a hegemonically neutral zone, where fault is found in individual rather than organised social behaviour. It is interesting to note that this bears striking similarities with the treatment of television violence, where the focus of both media coverage and effects research itself draws attention away from sociological explanations of crime and violence (which criminologists generally agree are the consequence of life circumstances, such as poverty and unemployment, which can be affected by social policy), and towards individualistic explanations regarding media use and behaviour. Here again, a serious social issue is given considerable treatment, but in a form which hegemonically bends attention towards accounts which carry little substance, but which are more congruent with a stable status quo.

This study has sought to demonstrate that children are far from being simply passive or reactive in relation to the mass media. The content of television programmes goes through complex processes of critical interpretation and integration with existing knowledge and understandings, and so is not at all likely to have direct or predictable 'effects' on attitudes or behaviour. Indeed, to seek to account for the origin of social problems by turning first to the mass media is to make a leap of judgement with no sociological basis. Children are generally sharp and cynical readers of the mass media – as they are able to demonstrate when given the opportunity to be *writers* of such media.

The mass media inevitably has some influence upon the perceptions of those who come into regular contact with it, however. In modern industrial societies, media content, whilst not necessarily *excluding* contentious issues, may deliver accounts of them which bend in favour of hegemonic stability by focusing on people, as autonomous individuals, rather than on institutions and the social-structural foundations underlying individual behaviour. Whilst a certain proportion of adults might see through such accounts, younger children cannot be expected to have the political awareness and knowledge required to realise that such explanations may be partial (although they would not be *incapable* of doing so). They therefore acquire a conception of environmental issues which can be seen as overemphasising the role of 'ordinary' people both in having created the problems, and in being able to solve them at a local level. Causes such as individual wastefulness, and solutions such as recycling and energy conservation, are prioritised at

the expense of a focus on the much more damaging activities of industries, the failure of governments to control them, and the place of both of these in a wider social system.

If children acquire the individualistic interpretation of ecological problems from the media aimed at them (or mass media more generally), however, this does not mean that they would treat any information about the environment uncritically, nor that they will be affected by specific bits of media content. If the individualistic approach is inherited, it is as a product of the whole *flow* of environmentally-related material. The traditional effects research methodologies are incapable of detecting such subtleties. Media audiences are not uncritical or indiscriminate consumers, and research must allow people to demonstrate their *capacities*, rather than the reductive notion of specific responses. Research must at least give participants the power to demonstrate both possible media influences and their abilities to deal with to them, before we can begin to appreciate the strength and character of either media power or audience resistance.

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Notes

[1] This process involved more than just running around and filming; although some aspects of each video were recorded relatively spontaneously, the planning of the contents included, for example, discussions of what the children regarded as a good and bad environment, looking at maps of the local area where relevant, and debates about how best to represent some subjects on screen.

[2] For details, see Gauntlett, 1997. The study of this whole *process* of producing each video – the ideas, the planning, comments and suggestions made during filming, debates which took place between the children, the narrative style and tone favoured, and so on – is at least as important as the finished video, to the project as a research method. Indeed, the final video – with music, titles, and a basic structure – was edited together by the researcher after the production process with the children was complete. Although each 'polished' video was put together with the intention of representing as closely as possible the themes and concerns which the children had apparently sought to highlight, and generally included all of the usable and meaningful footage, this finished presentation could almost be seen as irrelevant to the research. Each video

provides the best available summary of the material produced by the group, but was carefully edited – with the addition of effects such as music and on-screen credits – more as a gift to the children and the school, than for research purposes

[3] As with most aspects of this paper, further and more specific details are to be found in Gauntlett (1997).

[4] It is worth noting that there is no reason to think that the media literacy of the sample of children used in this study would be any different from that of any other children of the same age.

[5] To distinguish this inductive process from that traditionally used in effects research, it should be noted that this study has established (1) that the children regarded television as a primary source of information about the environment, (2) that the television messages had a particular slant, and (3) that the children reproduced this approach when invited to produce their own material on the subject. This is in sharp contrast, therefore, to the studies of TV violence which rarely seek to ask subjects how instructive they find the medium's coverage of that subject, and almost never examine the approach of the TV content itself (which, for the effects hypothesis to run smoothly, would need to be distinctly *promoting* violence). Having obtained data on all three points, this study is much better able to provide support for a cohesive theory.