Book reviews

In the service of young people? Studies and reflections on media in the digital age

Ulla Carlsson & Cecilia Von Feilitzen (Eds)

Nordicom, Goteborg, Sweden, 2006 $35 (soft), pp. 437

The international community of scholars and advocates for children and media is at a crossroad, with a number of new ideas emerging to challenge the old guard. Clinging to the mantra of public service media for children, many children's media advocates are just beginning to recognize that the landscape has been altered. All over the world, the Internet, satellite, cable television, mobile media, and video games are rapidly expanding children's access to information and entertainment. Traditional state regulatory frameworks designed to protect children from media violence, pornography, and advertising messages

about unhealthy foods are giving way to coregulatory approaches. In some countries, media literacy education initiatives are emerging to help empower citizens to take on increasing responsibility for their media use behavior.

This volume, edited by scholars at Goteborg University in Sweden, consists of materials from two previously published United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization–supported projects. Most interesting are the chapters exploring the role of information and entertainment media in the lives of children and youth in the Middle East. Tunisian scholar Mustapha Masmoudi reflects on the negative impact of foreign media on Arab children, who are largely unaware that most of the programming they view is imported. According to this author, these children "experience feelings of deprivation" resulting from the differences between lived experience and media representations (p. 83). In a different vein, Magda Abu-Fadil gives a reasoned critique of the lack of children's programming in Lebanon, framed by a broader analysis of the characteristics of news media generally in that country. She describes how broadcasting initiatives designed to produce youth-oriented shows on meaningful issues to teenagers, like the military draft, were halted mysteriously due to cozy relationships between government officials and broadcasters. Lebanese teens are now fed a heavy diet of celebrities, athletes, fashion, and high-tech gadgets, bringing them much of the same fare as European, Latin American, and Asian children receive.

Several chapters restate the now-familiar argument of children as victims of an oppressive, hypercommercialized media environment. As Juliet Schor's essay in this volume points out, in the United States, not only has the food industry impacted family food purchasing dynamics but also direct-to-child ads for food, cars, hotel and restaurant chains, tourist destinations, and consumer electronics have trained children how to influence their parents. A number of authors support the argument that the "unchecked growth of corporate power, and its fusion with state power" cannot meet children's needs for information and entertainment (Schor, p. 42). For example, economic considerations continue to dominate the decision making about children's media in both state-run and commercial networks in countries like Malaysia, India, and the Philippines. One member of the old guard, Lucyna Kirwil, vigorously massages 700 hours of content analysis data to reveal that positive depictions of appropriate behavior, critical thinking, and self-actualization are more likely to be found on Poland's public television networks than on its commercial networks. Many authors bemoan the decreasing importance of state-run educational media networks as globalized commercial services now proliferate.

One particularly strong essay reviews the psychological literature on media effects using the concepts of harmful and offensive content. Now that the British regulatory agency OFCOM has placed stronger emphasis on the concepts of protecting children from such material, Sonia Livingstone and Andrea Millwood Hargrave see an opportunity for the field as a whole. They reveal how the concepts of harm and offense have been conflated in the existing literature, pointing out some opportunities to move beyond the malingering stalemate about the measurement of media's negative effects by listing some new areas of focus, including marginalized groups, medium-specific effects, and factors that mediate negative effects.

Perhaps the weakest section of the book is its treatment of media literacy. It seems to have been written by a committee that aimed to list all forms of youth-oriented media around the world (except the United States). Most troubling is Ulla Carlsson's definition of media literacy, which does not attempt to describe media literacy's central focus on the practice of critical analysis, defining it instead as accessing and understanding the media and "having a critical attitude" (p. 309). Although the book includes nearly 100 pages of examples

Book reviews

of media literacy programs, most of this content is brief and descriptive, with little effort to show theoretical, thematic, or conceptual links or discontinuities between programs.

This volume will be a resource for those scholars, educators, and others with interests in international approaches to the study of children and media. However, readers may find themselves likely to walk away from this book confused by the multiplicity of perspectives, without a framework for understanding the underlying values that have differentially shaped how different stakeholders respond to the challenges of a global children's media industry.

Renee Hobbs
Temple University