

BOOK REVIEW

Children's Wellbeing in the Digital Age: Multi-disciplinary Perspectives from the Harvard–Australia Symposium

Elizabeth Handley, Colin MacDougall and Michael Rich (Eds.)
The Federation Press, Sydney, NSW 2015
ISBN 9781760020286, pp.272, Paperback. AU\$59.95

This publication is based on papers developed for a symposium in 2010 which was, in itself, an ambitious project which sought to explore the range of disciplinary perspectives on children and the media. The book is divided into three parts and tackles these complex issues focussing on the impact and influence of media on children. In the introduction we are reminded of the value of interdisciplinary approaches to questions about children and the media. The methods of inquiry and the structure of the symposium are explained, together with the relevance of the inclusion (and omission) of the contributors to the book. Readers are encouraged to access some of the original symposium papers elsewhere.

Part two of the book focuses on six key disciplinary areas including ethics, bioethics, paediatrics, social work, librarianship and information collection, law (media) and public health nutrition. The structure and organisation of each chapter includes a section on the particular issues for the discipline, the methods the discipline uses, the strengths and weaknesses of the discipline, the discipline's contribution to debates on media use and children's wellbeing and a short case study.

The chapters in part three of the book are all focused on psychology, and whilst there is no doubt over the rigour of psychological research methods, there are issues about the focus of inquiry. The emphasis within part three is on violence/aggression, advertising, body image and sleep: issues which parents and carers are concerned with, at least in western contexts. In chapter 14 for example, the consumption of "junk food", exposure to violence and adult themed materials, the sexualisation of children in marketing materials and the impact of TV consumption on sleep behaviour are all well covered.

The book tends towards a construction of childhood as passive rather than active and this may be because of the dominance of psychological perspectives and influences in the chapters. In *Children's Wellbeing in the Media Age* children tend to be situated in isolation from families and perceived as objects of concern and anxiety. If the book had adopted a more interdisciplinary perspective, issues explored (such as body image), would have

focussed on the gendered and structural conditions in society which also contribute to our understanding of eating disorders. As it stands, there is an absence of these structural explanations and factors in the book.

It is now six years since the symposium and in the meantime there has been unparalleled expansion of social media and digital technologies and a corresponding increase in children and young people's use of these types of media globally, not simply in western contexts. Smart and mobile technologies have shifted the ways in which children and young people and their families use the media for communication, information seeking, learning and leisure. Whilst we should explore the risks and threats to children's wellbeing in the media age, we should also recognise that we are past the point of no return when it comes to policing the media which children are engaging with and exposed to and instead we should move towards a position of encouraging a dialogue between children and society which foregrounds the potential benefits and gains that these media have upon children's daily lives.

There were only very limited suggestions that the media age positively impacts on children, for example reducing isolation, connecting with and communicating with peers in a global context, understanding the wider world and engaging in global issues which affect them. At least for this reader an overemphasis on risk and caution in the book was disappointing. Nonetheless for those who wish to develop their understanding of some of the ways in which media has been incorporated into children's lives this book provides a useful introduction to the topic.

Joanne Westwood

Senior Lecturer

School of Applied Social Science

University of Stirling

Scotland