

David Buckingham

The Making of Citizens

Young People,

News

and Politics

Congress

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The Making of Citizens

Young People, News and Politics

David Buckingham



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Preface and Acknowledgements

News journalism has often been seen as an essential guarantee of democracy. Far from being a trivial daily ritual, the newspaper and the television news broadcast serve as indispensable sources of the information on which the health of civil society depends. As older social bonds gradually fall into disrepair, news has become our primary means of access to the public sphere of political debate. News journalism, it is argued, is essential to creating and sustaining an informed citizenry. Without it, we face a future of apathy, alienation and the abuse of political power.

Yet recent research suggests that television news is largely failing to fulfil these responsibilities, particularly among young people. With each new generation, interest in news media and in politics itself has steadily declined. Active citizenship, it is argued, is a thing of the past, or merely a utopian fantasy. Young people today are postmodern citizens – cynical, distracted, no longer possessed of the civic virtues and responsibilities of older generations. For them, conventional politics is merely an irrelevance: the personal has become political, the private has become the public, entertainment has become education. Among this audience, traditional news journalism has simply been the victim of its own conservatism.

This book attempts to give some empirical substance to these debates. It is centrally concerned with how young people interpret and respond to broadly ‘political’ stories featured on television news. As such, it addresses several interrelated issues. It offers, firstly, an analysis of young people’s relationships with the public sphere of political debate – and in the process, argues for a rethinking of what we mean by ‘politics’ in the first place. It also provides an account of how young people relate to television news, and of the reasons why it is increasingly failing to attract the interest or attention of this audience. Finally, it analyses the dynamics of viewers’ interpretations of television, looking at how they make sense of the issues that are presented and how they judge television’s portrayal of those issues.

The book presents the findings of research conducted both in Britain and the United States, although it is not strictly speaking a comparative study. While it does offer an analysis of programmes themselves – and specifically of programmes explicitly aimed at this audience – its central emphasis

is on how young people *talk* about what they watch. It is through analysing such talk in considerable detail that the book attempts to assess the limitations and possibilities of news as a form of political communication – and indeed, as a form of political *education* for young people.

This is the third in a series of studies of young people's relationships with television that I have undertaken over the past decade or so. Like its predecessors, *Children Talking Television* (1993) and *Moving Images* (1996), it uses approaches derived from what is now termed 'British' Cultural Studies. As such, it is not essentially concerned with the *effects* of television, or with identifying the *psychological* dynamics of viewers' relationships with it, although it does have things to say about both of these. On the contrary, its central emphasis is on the social and interpersonal processes through which the meanings of television are constructed and defined.

Audience research of this kind has attracted considerable criticism among exponents of Cultural Studies in recent years, much of it from people who seem to understand very little about the motivations for conducting it in the first place. I do not wish to add to the generalized rhetoric that has sometimes characterized this debate. Suffice it to say that audience research of the kind presented here does not represent an abandonment of 'politics', as some have alleged. While I do believe that young people are a more critical and sophisticated audience than they are often assumed to be – and in this respect, the data presented here speak for themselves – this obviously does not mean that I intend to engage in a mere celebration of the power of 'active audiences'. Indeed, in some ways this book revisits very traditional questions in media research, for example, about news bias, about the pedagogic functions of news and about the nature of 'critical' viewing. In responding to young people's apparent alienation from the domain of politics, we have to pay attention to such apparently conventional questions about public knowledge and how it is to be developed and sustained. My implicit agenda here, in other words, is primarily an *educational* one.

The book is also quite conventionally structured. The first three chapters offer a reading of previous debates and research about the relationships between young people, news media and politics. Specifically, Chapter 2 reviews research on young people's use and understanding of television news; while Chapter 3 addresses recent debates about role of the media in relation to notions of citizenship and the public sphere. Chapter 4 discusses news programmes specifically aimed at young people, concentrating on issues of content, pedagogy and address. It also introduces the four programmes (two British, two American) that were used in the research. Chapter 5 discusses the methodology of the audience study, and presents some general findings about the young people's relationships both with news and with politics. It also contains a very detailed account of some sample extracts from the interviews. Chapters 6 and 7 present an analysis of the young people's interpretations of, and responses to, a total of eight news items used in the study. These chapters are necessarily quite extensive, but they are far from

merely descriptive. Finally, Chapter 8 summarizes the findings and discusses some implications of the research, both for the future of news production and for political education.

Presentations based on this research have been given at the University of Pennsylvania, New York University, the University of Wales, the University of Manchester Broadcasting Symposium and the Institute of Education, University of London. I would like to thank all those who attended for their feedback.

Articles drawing on the research have been published as follows:

‘News media, political socialization and popular citizenship: Towards a new agenda’, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, **14**(4), 1997.

‘The making of citizens: Pedagogy and address in children’s television news’, *Journal of Educational Media*, **23**(2/3), 1997.

‘Young people, politics and news media: Beyond political socialisation’, *Oxford Review of Education*, **25** (1/2), 1999.

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Chapter One

Turning off the News?

‘Young People Say No To News’ ran a front page headline in the *New York Times* (13 May 1996). Reporting on a study conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1996 (formerly the Times Mirror Center), the story noted a sudden decline in the percentage of people under 30 who say they regularly watch television news. Of course, young people have always been consistently less interested in news than their elders; yet, as this research suggests, the generation gap between them is growing steadily wider.

Despite this story’s claim of a sudden change, young people’s turn away from news journalism dates back at least 20 years. In an earlier report, symptomatically entitled *The Age of Indifference: A Study of Young Americans and How They View the News* (1990), the Times Mirror Center provided some broader historical comparisons. Irrespective of the advent of the so-called ‘Information Age’, the increased provision of news media and the rise in college attendance in the US, the report argues, young people are now less interested in news (particularly ‘political’ news) and less well-informed than their counterparts in earlier decades. Thus, the percentage of people under 30 who said they ‘read a newspaper yesterday’ declined from 67 per cent in 1965 to 29 per cent in 1996, while measures of information levels and news attentiveness among the young show a decline both over time and relative to older age groups. News about key events in recent political history, such as the revolutions in Eastern Europe, has, the report argues, failed to engage the younger audience.

While the Times Mirror study dates this change to the mid-1970s, other evidence suggests that the turn away from news may have begun even earlier. There is, for example, a consistent decline in newspaper readership in the US which dates back to the late 1920s (Putnam, 1995); and while some of this can be explained by the displacement to other media such as radio and television, the evidence suggests a more broad-ranging shift away from news in general. Thus, according to the Pew and Times Mirror studies, young people aged 18–30 are *also* turning off the television news to a greater degree than older generations – regular viewing of network news has declined from 52 per cent in 1965 to 22 per cent in 1996; where they do express an interest

in news, this is increasingly confined to 'tabloid' TV shows such as *Hard Copy*, *Inside Edition* and *A Current Affair*.

These findings are echoed in other studies. Industry research in the US (cited by Katz, 1993) suggests that the number of young adults (18–24) reading news magazines has declined by 55 per cent in the past 14 years; while the percentage of viewers between 18 and 34 watching commercial broadcast news has dropped by 45 per cent since 1980. Again, some of these shifts can doubtless be traced to the advent of new technologies and the resulting proliferation of media sources. Viewing of news is declining fastest among owners of home computers, and specialist cable channels such as CNN have taken viewers away from the networks – although CNN's audience is also now in decline. Nevertheless, age remains a significant factor here, independent of other variables.

This declining interest in news is seen in turn to result in a decline in 'informed citizenship'. The 1990 Times Mirror study, for example, points to an increasing degree of ignorance about basic political and geographical information – again, despite a rise in college attendance. Between 1947 and 1988, for instance, the percentage of young Americans who could find Europe on a world map fell from 45 per cent to 25 per cent; while the numbers who were able to recognize well-known political figures or answer test questions about recent political events were significantly lower than those in older age groups. These kinds of findings are reported in the press with increasing regularity – although, of course, it may be a mistake to take evidence about *factual recall* as evidence of *political understanding*.

Nevertheless, the wider consequences of this situation in terms of political participation are potentially very serious. For example, there has been a decline in the proportion of young voters (18–24) who bother to turn out at national elections in the US, from 50 per cent in 1972 to 41 per cent in 1992, although the reverse is the case for the oldest age group of voters (65+). For the Times Mirror researchers, the lack of political awareness among the young leads to a kind of 'blind faith' in political leaders and in the institutions of government. According to these data, young people are actually less inclined to be critical of big business and of government, and are thus more vulnerable to political persuasion, for example by campaign advertising – although the Pew Center (1996) study also suggests that public perceptions of the credibility of television news itself are in decline.

Research from other countries paints a similar picture. In their book *Freedom's Children*, produced by the left-liberal British think-tank Demos, Helen Wilkinson and Geoff Mulgan (1995) point to an 'historic political disconnection' among the younger generation both in the UK and across Europe. Surveys in Britain, France and Germany over the past decade show that young people under 25 are significantly less likely to be registered to vote, to turn out at elections, and to be politically active than they were in earlier generations. Membership of political parties and related organizations (including environmental pressure groups and women's groups) is

increasingly confined to the middle aged and the elderly. While this disconnection from conventional forms of politics is particularly marked among women, ethnic minorities and the poor, young people are consistently more alienated than adults. This is the case even in countries like Australia, where voting is compulsory: a 1994 poll in that country registered very high agreement with various negative statements about politicians, and showed that young people placed greater trust in pop musicians (Hartley, 1996: 73).

Likewise, recent research suggests that young people's use of, and interest in, news media are also comparatively low. In the UK, only 6 per cent of young people's viewing of television comes into this category, while their reading of newspapers focuses largely on entertainment, features and sports pages (Harcourt and Hartland, 1992). Surveys repeatedly find that young people have a low level of interest in media coverage of political affairs (Walker, 1996). Given the lack of comparative historical data, it is impossible to know whether this is simply an effect of age – and hence, perhaps, a phase that young people pass through – or whether it is a cohort effect that will last into adulthood, as in the US. On the face of it, the latter would seem to be more likely.

Two further elements can be added to this picture. The first is the decline in the provision of informational television programming for children and young people in the wake of deregulation, both in the US and elsewhere. In the US, the Children's Television Act (1990) explicitly required franchise holders to provide 'educational' programming, although in the years immediately following the passing of the Act, stations attempted to circumvent this requirement by claiming, for example, that cartoons like *The Jetsons* could be defined as educational on the grounds that they informed children about life in the future (see Kunkel, 1993). While this loophole has now to some extent been closed, the business of monitoring whether the Act's requirements are being met still appears to be largely down to individual viewers rather than government regulatory bodies.

Even in countries with a much stronger tradition of public service broadcasting, such as the UK, the proportion of informational programming appears to have declined relative to entertainment programming in recent years (Blumler, 1992; Davies and Corbett, 1997) – although the measurement of these categories is problematic, particularly with the emergence of hybrid forms of 'info-tainment'. Such changes are partly dictated by the move towards a more market-led system, and the resulting drive towards maximizing audiences. Although factual programmes (such as the BBC news show *Newsround*, discussed in Chapter 4, and the magazine programme *Blue Peter*) remain among the most popular children's programmes, they are generally perceived to be less likely to win good ratings, and are significantly more difficult to sell in overseas markets (see Buckingham *et al.* 1999).

The second factor to add in here is the comparative value of print media and television as means of political learning. While researchers disagree on

the extent of *causality*, there is nevertheless a consistent *correlation* between exposure to print media and higher levels of political knowledge, as compared with exposure to television (Chaffee and Yang, 1990; Graber, 1988; Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Robinson and Levy, 1986). While those who follow news in general are predictably better informed than those who do not, those who rely primarily on television news are less well-informed than those who also read newspapers. Chaffee and Yang, for example, suggest the following:

Television is a worthy supplement to these print media, but reliance on TV alone may be associated with socialization away from politics. To say, 'I get most of my news from television', as a majority of Americans do, may be a socially acceptable way of admitting, 'I don't care much about politics' (1990: 143).

These authors go so far as to doubt whether 'television-dependent citizens' can actually be seen as citizens 'in the strong, proactive sense of that term', since they are less likely to vote, to have reasons for their voting decisions, or to be involved in or to understand political processes. If, as these authors and the surveys quoted above confirm, the move away from print media is manifested much more strongly among the young, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the knowledge gap between young and old is likely to increase exponentially. On this account, the future of news journalism – and indeed of democratic citizenship – looks bleak indeed.

Explaining and Blaming

The reasons for these developments, however, are predictably more difficult to establish. The Times Mirror researchers, for example, suggest that the turn away from 'hard news' can be seen as symptomatic of a more general 'turning inward' in US society. Yet for many commentators, it is television that is primarily to blame. Robert Putnam (1995), for example, regards the decline in newspaper readership as an indication of the decline of 'social capital' – that is, of organized social networks and the feelings of 'connectedness' they produce – which he argues has largely been caused by the rise of television. Roderick Hart (1994) similarly connects the rise of television and the slow demise of print journalism in the US to the decline in civic pride and the growth of cynicism, particularly among the young. Both appear to look back to a 'golden age' before the advent of television. (It is worth noting, however, the contrast between these arguments and the findings of the Times Mirror study on young people's tendency towards 'blind faith', p. 2.) Whatever explanation one favours, it is clear that the declining interest in news journalism is seen by many commentators as an indication of a broader social crisis, and of the failure of older generations to adequately socialize the young – a situation that most suggest is likely to continue.

Correlations among broad social phenomena of this kind typically give rise to multiple interpretations; in this case, significant questions about the *direction* of the causality remain. To what extent does the decline in interest in news media *produce* a decline in 'social capital', and to what extent is it a *symptom* of it? Does dependence on television produce political apathy, or vice-versa? Logic would suggest a spiral of causality, and a network of inter-related variables, rather than a single cause-effect relationship. Yet, as in many other areas, blaming television often seems to provide a simple explanation for all the ills of the world.

Nevertheless, serious news journalism itself is predominantly exonerated in these debates: it is represented in terms of its own self-estimation, as a neutral source of information and a fundamental guarantee of a healthy democracy. Likewise, 'democracy' seems to be defined in terms of a utopian ideal, rather than in terms of any actually existing manifestation. The possibility that an apathetic or even cynical electorate is something that might be *required* and indeed actively produced by the status quo – or indeed that cynicism might be an entirely reasonable response to the current state of democratic politics (cf. Gripsrud, 1992) – is not one that such critics seem prepared to entertain.

From this perspective, then, both news and democracy appear to be seen as constants; what has changed is people's attitudes towards them. It is not democracy – or indeed news journalism, or the relationship between them – that is the problem, but people's lack of interest in those things. The resulting implication here is that the failure is that of young people themselves. If kids do not read the *New York Times* or watch *The News Hour* on TV, then it is their fault for being so ignorant. Certainly in the case of the Times Mirror study, and less directly in Hart's book, young people are implicitly condemned for being lazier and less socially responsible than their parents; and if there have been undesirable changes in the media, such as the advent of 'tabloid television', this too can be laid at the door of the young, with their love of superficiality and sensationalism.

This view inevitably invites a counter-argument. The media critic Jon Katz (1993), writing in *Rolling Stone* magazine, blames young people's growing rejection of conventional journalism fairly and squarely on the journalists themselves. Quoting several examples of journalists' 'attacks on kid culture' – from rock and roll in the 1950s to rap music, video games and *Beavis and Butthead* in the 1990s – he argues that journalists have effectively abandoned the young, rather than the other way round. According to Katz, such attacks merely reflect journalists' growing sense of anxiety about the threats to their authority as 'guardians of the country's political life'.

Contrary to journalists' representations of them as 'TV zombies', narcotized by endless acts of violence, Katz argues that young people have a very different orientation to information from that of older generations. They are, he suggests, more appreciative of the 'breadth and variety of information' provided by new media such as cable TV and the growing specialist

magazine sector; and they prefer their more 'informal' and 'ironic' style to the 'monotonously reassuring voice' of mainstream news journalism. Katz argues that young people have a broader definition of news than mainstream journalists; and he refutes the implication, which he detects in the Times Mirror study, 'that public awareness is measurable primarily in terms of news media consumption and that youthful disinterest in absorbing whatever journalism offers reflects ignorance or indifference' (1993: 130). Ultimately, it is the failure of the established news media to connect with the forms of 'everyday politics' which are most important for this generation that accounts for their declining audience. In this respect, Katz suggests, the emergence of more popular forms of news journalism – such as 'tabloid television' and 'faction' shows – could be seen as an attempt to engage more fully with the changing cultural styles and competencies of the younger audience (Sternberg, 1995).

Katz's argument clearly espouses a form of generational rhetoric, in which the unitary categories of 'young' and 'old' – or, more specifically in this case, 'kids' and 'baby boomers' – are defined against each other. A broadly optimistic historical narrative is constructed here which seems just as essentialist as the narrative of decline that it attempts to replace. The kids are now 'all right', according to Katz, just as they were previously 'all wrong'. From this perspective, the decline of traditional news journalism is not to be lamented, but on the contrary to be celebrated.

Yet despite its tendency towards polemic, this argument finds many echoes in recent academic work on the media. Researchers have increasingly challenged the idea that young people's lack of interest in news is somehow symptomatic of laziness or irresponsibility: on the contrary, it is argued that conventional forms of news journalism have proven signally ineffective in enabling them to 'translate' broader political events into the context of their own everyday lives (Barnhurst and Wartella, 1991). Although Katz does not mention the word 'postmodernism', it clearly underlies his emphasis on irony and diversity, and his rejection of the 'monotonously reassuring voice' of the established news media, while his notion of media audiences as active and autonomous, and his call for more popular forms of news journalism, are increasingly common in academic Cultural Studies (e.g. Fiske, 1989, 1992). Likewise, there are many who argue that the potential of new media forms and technologies in terms of participatory democracy is significantly greater than that of more traditional forms of news journalism. Even comparatively mainstream critics are acknowledging the need to move beyond the 'classical' model of news in the wake of the 'crisis in public communication' (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Dahlgren, 1995).

This debate about young people's changing relationship with news media thus raises fundamental questions about the nature and meaning of citizenship in contemporary societies. In preparing the ground for the empirical investigations analysed in this book, the following two chapters explore some of these questions in more detail. Chapter 2 discusses previous research on

young people's use and understanding of television news, and its role in political socialization. Chapter 3 provides a critical account of recent debates about the emergence of more popular forms of news journalism, and their implications for theories of citizenship and the public sphere. As I shall argue, more positive responses to the crisis in young people's relationship with politics and with news media will need to avoid the contrasting temptations of conservative lament and postmodern celebration.

Chapter Two

Beyond Political Socialization

There has been very little research on young people's relationship with television news. On one level, this is hardly surprising. As the studies described in the previous chapter suggest, young people appear to watch very little news; and their consumption of news media in general is in decline. Yet it would be wrong to overstate this case. According to some estimates (Gunter, 1987), news and current affairs programming constitute one quarter of total broadcast output, and much of this is screened during periods when children are available to view. As previous studies have repeatedly shown, children frequently express indifference, or even considerable dislike, towards the news (Buckingham, 1996; Cullingford, 1992); yet they may often have little choice but to watch it.

Evidence on this topic is exceptionally sparse; but it would seem reasonable to conclude that insofar as young people *are* being informed about current events, television news is likely to constitute a significant source. This may be the case even with very young children. For example, Denis Howitt (1982) reports on an earlier unpublished study looking at British preschoolers' perceptions of events in Northern Ireland. While their knowledge was predictably very vague and confused, these children were aware that there was political violence taking place in Northern Ireland, and that bombs and weapons were involved – knowledge which, Howitt argues, could only have come from television. As this implies, much of young people's viewing of news may be accidental rather than purposeful, distracted rather than concentrated; as Katz (1993) suggests, they may be more inclined to absorb information 'on the fly', in fragments, during the course of other activities.

The question here is whether, and in what ways, this viewing of television news might contribute to their understanding of politics. In examining research on this issue in this chapter, we will inevitably have to ask what is meant by 'political understanding', and how that understanding is to be evaluated and assessed.