

Unwholesome and Insipid Fruit? ¹
 A Modern Unpacking of Media Panic Discourses
 and a Push for Progressive Media Literacy Education

“All panics are united by a firm belief in rational argumentation: if people only know about the dangers of the media, if only their tastes are elevated, or if the media mechanisms are properly revealed, then they will change their cultural preferences. This belief is facilitated by, indeed founded on, an intrinsic historical amnesia. Every new panic develops as if it was the first time such issues were debated in public...The intense preoccupation with the latest media fad immediately relegates older media to the shadows of acceptance” (Drotner, 1999, p. 610).

I. An Overview of Media Panic

Nearing the end of the film, they amass for a fourth and final time, orange-skinned, green-haired, three feet tall in full white body suits. By this point they are no longer strangers to us, and predictably, have another musical moral to relay. These nightmarish Oompa-Loompas—endangered natives of Loompaland and dedicated employees of a certain alliterative confectioner—inform their audience that if we are wise, we shall indeed listen closely. Their message, pared down to its essential quatrain:

*“What do you get from a glut of TV?
 A pain in the neck and an IQ of three.
 Why don't you try simply reading a book?
 Or could you just not bear to look?”*

Yes, these Oompa-Loompas are opinionated, and apparently unaware of the irony of appearing in an oft-televised feature film in order to spread their anti-TV message. And although the original film version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* turned forty this year, the

¹ In 1787, the German education reformer Friedrich Gedike warned against the spread of juvenile literature by declaring that its mental nourishment was akin to “unwholesome and insipid fruit.”

message promoted by various demagogues in today's Internet age remains about the same as that of the Oompa-Loompas: *Protect your children from the corrupting power of popular media* (defined mainly, now, as digital media) *and the technologies that will make them dumb, unimaginative, and disobedient. Prevent them from turning into zombies by handing them a book. If there is to be any hope for society, kids must turn off, tune out, and unplug. They must return to old media in order to recapture their humanity.* Ad nauseam, Americans (and indeed, people all over the developed world) are treated to this message as if it were simple common sense, beyond the need for examination, and leading to a societal condition known widely as media panic, a term defined by the Danish media scholar Kirsten Drotner (1999) as “emotionally charged reactions on the appearance of new media” (p. 593). Drotner further explains that media panics “represent a complex constellation of generational, cultural and existential power struggles through which adults seek to negotiate definitions of character forming in order to balance fundamental dilemmas of modernity” (p. 593). These sorts of power struggles can generally be witnessed through adults² repudiating—out of fear or a sense of duty—the media choices of youths, and the youths continuing with their media practices unabated. The novelist Reif Larson (2011) posits that “fear and technology are well-acquainted bedfellows—in fact, if a new technology does not send people into a tailspin of doomsday scenarios, then chances are this technology is not going to have any sort of pervasive cultural impact” (p. 5). Since it is patently clear that new and digital media³ have, indeed, had a pervasive cultural impact, I shall move into an investigation of several fervent reactions to such media.

² Not to essentialize on the basis of age, but ADULTS are typically the ones who levy complaints about youth culture and youth-oriented media. As stated by Drotner, the media panic discussion “is an adult discussion that primarily focuses on children and young people” (p. 596).

³ “New media” is a designation that emerged late in the 20th century to refer to (mainly digital) mediums which offer on-demand access to content at any time, on an array of platforms. Additionally, new media tend towards interaction, creative participation and community formation around media content.

Earlier this year, Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood (CCFC), a Boston nonprofit seeking to protect children from marketing, sponsored “Celebrate Screen-Free Week” from April 18-24, and carpeted the Internet (again, no sense of irony?) with appeals to unplug from media. CCFC’s rationale centers on the ‘common-sense’ certitudes that “We all know that children spend far too much time with screens” and that “excessive⁴ screen time is harmful for children—it’s linked to poor school performance, . . . attention problems, and the erosion of creative play” (www.commercialfreechildhood.org). Perhaps because CCFC considers these statements to be mostly self-evident, there is little empirical evidence provided on the website to back them up. Screen-Free Week (formerly known as TV-Turnoff Week, but given a more contemporary name to keep pace with evolving technologies) promises that by unplugging ourselves and our children from new media, we will lead healthier, happier, and more successful lives—again, a statement not quantified due to its apparent good sense. In making this declaration, CCFC attempts to enforce a rigid and impassable cognitive binary, with media technologies on the one hand, and “playing, connecting with nature, reading, daydreaming, creating, exploring, and spending time with family and friends” on the other; there’s no wiggle room in the rhetoric for using media technologies toward any of these ends, or for living a life that employs both hands.

Fundamental to CCFC’s perspective is the belief that people, and especially children, are passive consumers of new media and that such media manipulate us, rather than we selectively and discerningly manipulating media. The belief that popular media are harmful toward children is certainly echoed by a host of other commentators, through binary-dependent statements such as: “[A]sk yourself this question—do you want your child learning by interacting with

⁴ The term ‘excessive’ lacks quantification, though it is frequently used to infer addiction.

televisions or people?” (Orr, p. 2). In the discourse of media panic, it seems that it’s either one pole or the other, and the argument is thus very polarizing. Rarely is a reality depicted by media critics in which children may learn through meaningful interactions with both people *and* technologies, or in which children may exert agency in their interactions with people, nature, *and* new media.

Similar to CCFC, but with a greater reach, Common Sense Media has become widely known for disseminating the message (through televised, online, and print content) that popular media are dangerous and play a part in turning children into passive, mindless, unimaginative voyeurs. Common Sense Media partially justifies its stance by stating that “the number one media concern for parents has shifted from television to the Internet” and that “85% of parents reported that among all forms of media, the Internet poses the greatest risk to their children” (Louge, p. 3), although it fails to take credit for having any role in influencing the parental concerns it cites. In any case, rather than sponsoring something as innocuous and easy to ignore as a screen-free week, Common Sense Media, which ostensibly bases its central tenets on research conducted by Howard Gardner, “offers a free curriculum to schools that teaches students how to behave online” (Clifford 2010), and refocuses power back in the hands of *older and wiser* adults. The curriculum, implemented throughout the country, is localized around the belief that there is an “array of negative health effects linked to greater use of television, music, movies and other media” (St. George 2008). It is a reactionary outlook to the core, predicated “primarily on a concern...in which children are viewed as inherently weak and prone to sin,” where popular media are seductive, and where “the goal of education is to save kids from themselves” (Rogow, p. 284).

Mirroring the alarmist stances of CCFC and Common Sense Media, the argument that new media technologies are dangerous to children and jeopardize our collective future is well-documented in a slew of recent books, namely *The Shallows* (Carr), *Distracted* (Jackson & McKibben), *You Are Not A Gadget* (Lanier), and *The Dumbest Generation* (Bauerlein), which all more or less argue that media technologies “are stripping kids of their ability to process information and creating a massive, generation-wide case of attention deficit disorder” (Hingston, p. 87). Further, there have been a number of studies based on the underlying assumption that media interactions are harmful to children, sponsored by, among others, The Media Education Foundation, Action Coalition for Media Education, American Academy of Pediatrics, National Institute on Media and the Family, The New Mexico Media Literacy Project, and A Day Without Media (Rogow, p. 288). Each of these studies problematizes youth involvement with media, and portrays children as being ‘at-risk’ rather than empowered, with the consequence that with increased media use “we will sacrifice something important not only in our selves but in our culture” (Carr, p. 7). The implication is that culture, rather than being fluid or plural, is some sort of fixed entity that can be damaged or broken if not properly maintained. “If all you have is a hammer,” postulates *The New Yorker’s* Adam Gopnik, “everything looks like a nail; and, if you think the world is broken, every machine looks like the hammer that broke it” (p. 128).

The idea that kids need to frolic and learn without popular media and technology weighing them down capitalizes on adults’ undependable nostalgia for a better, simpler time and the faulty belief that today’s children are dumb, distracted, and easily corruptible⁵. Such a stance presupposes that children lack agency in their media interactions and it denies anything

⁵ *The New Yorker’s* Nick Paumgarten describes a national testing protocol that “insures that each generation of kids looks dim to its elders” and adds that “Your kids are no stupider than their grandparents” (p. 25).

participatory or uniquely beneficial about new media's affordances. In December 2010, *Philadelphia Magazine* quite visibly published Sandy Hingston's article, "Is It Just Us, Or Are Kids Getting Really Stupid?" as a cover story, and represented the youth media debate as something close to home. When Hingston leads off her article with the scare-inducing "the way your kids live now is rewiring their brains," (p. 54) she is referring also to her own adolescent son, Jake, who "doesn't read and can't spell" despite being in honors English classes. Sometimes he even forgets the days of the week. The suggestion is that "children today seem *dumber* than they used to [because] they don't know the most basic stuff" (p. 56). (Basic, it should be mentioned, is comprised of the information that modern kids' parents and grandparents are presumed to have learned in school, back in the halcyon days when education worked, dammit.) Never mind the fact that National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results have been consistent (consistently *poor*) for decades, "which may prove nothing except our amnesia of past ignorance" (Sam Wineburg, as quoted in Paumgarten, p. 25).

Now, it could certainly be argued that rather than knowing *stuff*, children today may actually be more likely to practice the skills that they value, some of which involve and are heightened by the media technologies that have "rewired their brains." However, an investigation into what counts as knowledge is not on Hingston's docket. Instead, readers are expected and encouraged to be aghast at the simple *stupidity* of children who might not want or need to read canonical Russian literature or memorize the times tables. How could these cherished touchstones of civilization, wonders Hingston, be less important than such rubbish as social networking or online gameplay?

Within her article, Hingston briefly interviews the University of Pennsylvania's Yasmin Kafai, and challenges her to explain how something as seemingly frivolous as playing *World of*

*Warcraft*⁶ could count as substantial learning. Despite Kafai's careful response that immersive gameplay involves the "mastery of incredibly complex systems" and builds "skills that corporate employers are very interested in", Hingston quickly counters that her own son "would be a better student, better future employee, *better human being*, if he spent six hours a day reading Tolstoy and listening to Bach instead of playing *WoW*" (p. 61). To Hingston, as to the Oompa-Loompas, when it comes to building character and cognition, there is a clear division between high and popular (low) culture—as cleanly represented by old and new media—and she seems to see little value in the digital technologies that she would relegate to the latter heap, no matter how much higher-order thinking and hands-on participation they entail. Hingston's stance appears to reflect what Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) describe as "re-awakened traditional anxieties about 'cultural value'" in the modern age (p. 1), and represents a conservative mindset that "consuming popular media...require[s] no intellectual or cultural competencies" (p. 2), especially when compared to the 'classics' of yesteryear. It is Gedike's "unwholesome and insipid fruit" argument reborn for the modern age, and it serves the same purpose of glorifying the old media and beatifying its proponents—who tend to hold power—while simultaneously condemning as culturally inferior the new media and its fans—who tend to be young and not to wield as much power⁷. After all, as stated by Drotner, the language of media panic often leads to "opposition between people based on their different modes of reception" (p. 611), and so it should come as no surprise that Hingston, a college-educated parent, author, and de facto power holder, champions one form's supposed cultural superiority over another's supposed cultural bankruptcy. This is a recurring theme of all panics, says Drotner: "questions of the general

⁶ *WoW* is a hugely popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)

⁷ (A rather extreme example of this dichotomy is illustrated by Bomani Armah's (2008) tongue-in-cheek viral rap video, "Read A Book," with its memorable chorus of "read a book, read a book, read a motherfucking book.")

character formation of groups of people other than the writer's own" (p. 601), with the questions themselves predicated on "political, social and cultural discourses of power" (p. 600).

II. Delving Deeper: Appropriating the Language of Addiction

It is one thing to bemoan the amount of time that children spend 'plugged in' to new media—no matter how one evaluates the medium's value—and it is an entirely different thing to bandy about a diagnostic term such as 'addiction', which represents another common component in the discourse of media panic. Often, children and adults are hastily pathologized and said to be *addicted* to the media (whether TV, video games, the Internet, a cellular telephone, or Facebook, etc.) when their use is perceived to be *excessive*. So, to begin, the question must be raised: what *is* addiction and can one be addicted to the media or to a technology? The American Society of Addictive Medicine defines addiction as:

“[A] primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in the individual pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. The addiction is characterized by impairment in behavioral control, craving, inability to consistently abstain, and diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors...” (<http://www.asam.org/>).

Can this definition be used to describe heavy users (including children) of the media, and can they be said to suffer from a disease? A review of the literature seems to suggest that, indeed, media addiction is a recognized form of addiction, and one that has prompted more than a few scientific studies, both nationally and internationally, in recent decades. To give us a solid basis

in understanding this phenomenon, the social scientists Huh and Bowman (2008) define media addiction as excessive human-machine interaction (p. 6), which they characterize as a “process addiction: a specific type of addiction defined as a behavior dependence, similar to compulsive shopping or gambling” (p. 18). Like substance addictions, process addictions, say Huh and Bowman, can be identified by certain factors, including compulsive use, cravings, and withdrawal symptoms.

In discussing Internet addiction, the communication scholar Song, et al. (2004), invokes stimulus and response, and characterizes media addiction as a “process gratification,” whereby the gratification is “realized during consumption” and is achieved “by being involved in the process of communication” rather than from the content of the communication itself (p. 385, emphasis mine). For example, reading a newspaper to gather information might be considered a non-addictive content gratification, whereas surfing the Internet or playing a MMORPG simply to pass the time could be recognized as a process gratification. Song, et al., warns that process gratifications may “give rise to Internet addiction” (p. 386).

Huh and Bowman remind us that “There is more to addiction than simply spending a lot of time with a particular activity” (p. 21) and caution us to remember that there is a difference between heavy use and compulsive use when asserting claims of media addiction. A clear connection must be drawn between the individual’s media-consumption behavior and the individual’s dysfunctional and chronic impairment of control over her or his media use. In other words, there’s a difference between a time-consuming activity and a compulsive disorder.

This seems as good a place as any to review a sampling of statements that have been made in regard to the media’s supposed addictiveness:

- “Media have an influence on human psyche similar to the addictive actions of psychoactive substances or gambling” (Zboralski, et al., p. 8).
- “Internet is addictive like narcotics” (from *Berlingske Tidende*, 17 March 1998, as quoted in Drotner, p. 595).
- “It’s like Facebook is an addiction” (Eva, a high school student, as quoted in Hingston, p. 87).
- “Internet addiction, more formally known as pathological Internet use, is a type of impulse control disorder” where what had once been active and engaged decision making about which media to consume “became dormant with repeated media consumption” (Song, et al., p. 384).
- Popular media offer “a seductive message of pleasurable consumption, convenience, and complacency” (Gates, p. 59).
- “The problem of excessive computer and Internet use is increasing more rapidly every year and it can occur together with other kinds of addiction” (Zboralski, et al., p. 11).
- “Pathological computer use is connected...with shyness, low self-esteem, low interpersonal competence, loneliness, lack of social support, and the coexistence of mental disorders” (Zboralski, et al., p. 12).
- “Reports from around the world suggest that gaming addiction is real and on the rise. Nationally, 8.5 percent of youth gamers (ages 8 to 18) can be classified as pathological or clinically ‘addicted’ to playing video games” (Harris Interactive).
- The Internet is “a set-up for addictive behavior” (Penn neurologist Anjan Chatterjee, as quoted in Hingston, p. 88).
- The Internet is a “spawning ground for excessive use” (Song, et al., p. 387).

This language is fairly consistent, and so my question becomes this: are we really saying that ‘heavy’ media users, including children, suffer from a disease? Do the media practices of millions of modern children qualify as a compulsion? An addiction? An impairment? And who gets to be the judge? Old media proponents whose authority is threatened by encroaching modernity? Whether kids and youth are spending “an average of eight and a half hours a day in

front of screens” (Hingston, p. 56), “seven-and-a-half hours a day with a computer, television or smart phone” (Clifford), or “nearly 45 hours a week” with media (St. George), can we, in good conscience, invoke the language of medical pathology? Does it make no difference at all *how* children are using media, and in what context, before we label it as uniformly dangerous? Isn’t there an enormous difference between children exercising the agency to create, to produce, to publish, to remix and re-purpose, to explore, to play, to think critically, to critique, and to interact socially online, and Gates’s umbrella claim of seductive consumption and complacency? If there is, it is the difference between hope and panic.

III. The Case for Popular Media

“Recent research,” writes Burn, et al. (2010), “has been inclined to celebrate the role of new technologies in giving young people access to new opportunities for media production” (p. 189). Production, or the ability not simply to consume media content but to create and participate with and within it, is clearly an area that is missing from many of the arguments put forth by youth media opponents. In fact, media critics and the panic discourses they employ tend to focus on “the effect of what the media do to people—not what people do with the media,” and they “continuously define young people as objects—and often vulnerable victims” rather than as creators who may possess criticality and agency (Drotner, p. 611). Media critics fail to note that much of new media’s allure lies in a participatory, customizable nature that lends itself to active, rather than passive, engagement. Many pro-media scholars thus assert that the child-as-media-victim angle could not be further from the truth.

The media scholar Henry Jenkins, in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (2010), states that there are many potential

benefits of participatory culture⁸, including “opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, a changed attitude toward intellectual property, the diversification of cultural expression, the development of skills valued in the modern workplace, and a more empowered conception of citizenship.” (p. xii). Unfortunately, these skill sets and affordances tend to be undervalued when culture is narrowly defined by media critics as either high or low, and when the canon, with its nostalgic resonance (Hingston’s idea of “the basic stuff”) reigns supreme. Even more unfortunate is the mobilization of power, as evidenced by the actions of regressive ideologues and policymakers, that labels popular media as dangerous or frivolous and seeks to drive youths’ extant participatory media practices underground so that they may concentrate on the ‘high culture’ of Tolstoy and Bach, or the types of subject matter that is commonly found on standardized exams. “As information technology advances...and control begins to pass from the powerful to the plebs,” reasons NPR’s Brooke Gladstone (2011), “the powerful grow decidedly less enthusiastic about it” (p. 7). To be sure, children become more difficult to sort—and control—when they are not all learning the same things.

There is little doubt that, as Instructional Design Specialist Nathalie Louge (2006) writes, “the Internet is transforming the social world of adolescents by influencing how they communicate, establish and maintain relationships, and find social support” (p. 2). Certainly, the Internet is a far more socially and epistemologically diverse ‘setting’ than any brick-and-mortar classroom could hope to be. The question, thus, is whether adults who wield power should react to a transforming social world with hope or with fear and doomsday scenarios. For her part, Professor Ann Orr (2009), director of Eastern Michigan University’s Specialized Technology

⁸ Participatory culture, as it exists online, is defined by Jenkins as having “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (p. xi).

Lab, writes that she “comes away with more concerns than kudos” from a “technology-infused world” where kids “take in all their information via pixels and audio” (p. 1). Hingston wonders, “[W]here can [my son] go online to find out what being human means?” (p. 88). There seems to be a prevalent fear that the technology which ‘rewires our brains’ is foreshadowing a new dark age of inhumanity. I, in turn, must wonder: is humanity, for these media critics, to be found only in the pages of a classic? Are they in utter agreement with the Oompa-Loompas? Might not humanity lie in the ability to make mindful decisions about how we interact with the world?

Rebecca W. Black, Professor of Language, Literacy, and Technology, and the author of *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction* (2008), recognizes that there is a “general tendency in educational settings to dismiss or even outlaw popular culture, deriding it and the media as frivolous pursuits that distract students and take time away from more worthy pursuits such as reading literature, studying, and learning about ‘high culture’” (p. 14). Unlike Hingston and other media critics, Black sees this mindset as a grave disservice to young learners and the visual/spatial literacies they will need to develop and practice in order to function fully in the modern world. Black explains:

“[T]raditional forms of literacy, such as print-based reading and writing, are necessary but not sufficient for effective participation in a network society, as facility with digital forms of literacy becomes fundamental for participation and communication.” She continues: “[T]raditional literacy skills are now only a starting point for engaging in other forms of literate interaction” (p. 122).

Disregarding Black’s viewpoint in the name of deference to the ‘high culture’ of old books not only disrespects the varied cultural proclivities of children; it is tantamount to clipping their

wings. While Hingston desires for her son to be a greater appreciator of the ‘classics’ (and hence, not “stupid”), she is in effect lamenting his becoming a critical and actively engaged user/producer of new media, with its many social affordances. She does this by adhering to an either/or binary pertaining to old and new media. “The book,” contribute Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994), “is no longer the single privileged means of expression that it may have been in earlier times” (p. 5). It’s time for privileged *people* to live with—and indeed, embrace—that reality.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2007), James Paul Gee, the sociolinguist and strong proponent of youth media in education, says that “Movies, books, television, or video games...do not have any effects, good or bad, all by themselves... Technologies have effects only as they are situated within specific contexts” (p. 12). This idea, emanating from the tradition of literacy as social practice⁹ (Street, 1984), is diametrically opposed to the sort of dogmatic Oompa-Loompa thinking that roundly elevates one medium and derides another as dangerous without taking into account situational context. Gee’s statement demands that we look into the *kinds* of situated learning and thinking being done by users of various media, rather than formulating one-size-fits-all value judgments based on our own cultural preferences, assumptions, and biases. Gee foresees Hingston’s (et al.) argument about high culture living exclusively within old media, and calls it *the problem of content*. He reasons that such a stance as Hingston’s is “based on common attitudes about schooling, learning, and knowledge” (p. 22), where knowledge is synonymous with the content related to ‘academic’ disciplines (old Russian literature, for instance), and where activities that do not involve the

⁹ This viewpoint contends that literacies are not value-neutral skills (such that somebody could simply be taught to be literate or how to make meaning from a text), but are embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. In essence, literacy matters in the context of how it is deployed, and thus includes new media and multimodalities as much as it includes books.

accumulation of easily assessable content knowledge are seen as “meaningless play.” Gee is vehemently opposed to such a construct, and like Yasmin Kafai, sees video games as a platform for defending new media as pedagogically and developmentally vital.

Good video games, says Gee, incorporate cooperative learning, strategic problem solving, and multiple learning styles. They are “crafted in ways that encourage and facilitate active and critical thinking” (p. 38). Further, they are uniquely customizable, affording users the agency to create their own narratives (or to create niches) within the game’s overarching storyspace. Good video games are complicated enough to be continually challenging, but not so difficult that they are impossible to learn. In fact, Gee believes that video games, when well-designed with the player/learner in mind, can be more cognitively valuable than the types of decontextualized, skill-and-drill, ‘content-heavy’ classrooms that refuse to take youths’ media practices into consideration. To bolster his view, Gee adds that if children are playing video games “in such a way as to learn actively and critically” they are also:

- “1. Learning to experience (see and act on) the world in a new way
2. Gaining the potential to join and collaborate with a new affinity group
3. Developing resources for future learning and problem solving...
4. Learning how to think about...spaces that engage and manipulate people in certain ways and, in turn, help create certain relationships in society among people and groups of people, some of which have important implications for social justice” (p. 37).

Rare is the work of canonical literature than can fulfill these claims and still be considered *engaging* by most of the children who read it. That video games allow players to explore and create design spaces, construct and enact multiple identities, and negotiate social structures seems a far cry from CFCC’s assertion that popular media technologies are mindless diversions

that stand in the way of children playing, learning, and spending time with friends. On the contrary, well-designed new media tend to be playful, complex, strategic, participatory, social, and quite difficult to master.

When Jenkins (2010) states that we must champion “the emergence of a cultural context that supports widespread participation in the production and distribution of media” (p. 4), his implicit corollary is that we mustn’t champion a model of passivity and subservience to old media and a ‘high’ culture policed by the hidebound and authoritarian. We must, to quote Buckingham and Sefton-Green, be “looking at students not merely as consumers, but also as *producers* of popular culture” (p. 10). More than old media, new media foster active engagement, production, and criticality. This is what makes the contentions of those critics who proclaim that popular media turn children into *passive consumers* or zombies so very laughable. “The irony,” says Gladstone, “is that the more people participate in the media...the greater the paranoia that the media are in control” (p. xiv). This may help explain why a word like ‘complacency’ can be used to describe youth media producers who are anything but complacent in their media production practices.

“If we are to truly understand how students use new literacies and operate from a mindset rooted in digital space,” writes Black, “then we must begin to think about the online proliferation of networked, participatory ‘centers of learning’” (p. 7). This is a drastically different outlook from that of many media critics, who would prefer to deal with children’s digitally-rooted mindsets and cultural preferences by abolishing them, and forcing kids to embrace old media’s ‘humanity’. Simply put, that sort of regression isn’t going to happen, no matter how forceful the efforts of popular media’s opponents. Over time, the millions of youths who self-identify through their abilities to produce, re-purpose, publish, explore, play, critique, and interact online

will grow up, and digital media will finally find itself safely within the “shadows of acceptance” (Drotner, p. 610), along with television, radio, and the printing press before it. Common Sense Media might have to find something new about which to levy common sense complaints.

IV. Pushing Against Media Panic and For Progressive Media Education

Faith Rogow (2005), former president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), writes that:

“[I]n the United States, most people now get most of their information about the world from image-based sources. Given that reality, it doesn’t make sense to continue to relegate media literacy to a nice but optional classroom enhancement” (p. 283).

Indeed, we have entered an era in which visual literacies¹⁰—bound now to the digital age and revolving around the construction and deconstruction of images, signs, and “spatially organized arrangements” (Kress, p. 4)—are becoming more and more essential for a person’s full participation within American and global networked society (Hobbs, p. 9). Whether or not CCFC cares to admit it, we live in a massively mediated society; shouldn’t young people be afforded the right to navigate and give direction to it? It is my contention that educators, policymakers, and media critics must come to understand that young people’s media practices, far from being something to fear or reject, should be something to contemplate, celebrate, and further develop. Adults, and especially the adults who make decisions that affect groups of learners, must move past their assumptions that popular media are frivolous or a source of harm to children and society. It is critical, as we march ever farther into the digital age, that these adults shift away

¹⁰ There is a growing literature on this topic, informed by social semiotic theories. Several key scholars in the field include James Paul Gee, Gunther Kress & Theo Van Leeuwen, and Allan Luke, et al.

from the regressive discourses of media panic and toward the progressive discourses of media literacy.

Is my thinking tantamount to attacking windmills from the back of a horse? That is, am I being entirely quixotic? Isn't asking Sandy Hingston to value online youth culture (and epistemic plurality) just as naïve as Sandy Hingston asking her son to unplug and read Tolstoy? Almost certainly! However, the power relationship has been flipped. There's no sort of regulation *forcing* Hingston to adhere to my viewpoint in order to be deemed successful, but the same cannot be said for millions of children who are at the mercy of panicky policymakers working from the conviction that civilization ('truth, justice, and the American way') is in danger of crumbling at the feet of popular media. Even a cursory reading of *No Child Left Behind* (2001) shows it to be a reactionary piece of legislation that, through standardization and the elevation of old media/genre 'fluency', consolidates power, privileges a limited range of epistemologies, and reinforces educational status quos. *NCLB* indeed enforces a very narrow definition of what counts as knowledge and success; young people's marginalized media practices simply do not enter into the equation.

It is crucial, thus, to recognize that there are complex issues of power that underpin my appeal to new media's opponents. As stated by Drotner, "[T]he panic discourse...is basically a discourse of power whose stakes are the right to define cultural norms and social qualifications" (p. 604). With such high stakes, it's no wonder that those who currently wield power have no desire to hand it over to a bunch of 'media-addled' kids they may perceive as complacent, stupid, cultureless, or worse. But what if adults saw kids in a different light, as *pioneers*, and not simply ones who undermine generational status quos? What if, rather than decrying what is supposedly

lost—either cognitively or culturally—when old media and ‘high’ culture fall out of practice, we ask ourselves what is gained through new media’s affordances?

Rogow reminds us that “above all else, media literacy is about teaching students to think critically. It is a skill set encompassing the abilities to analyze, access, and produce media” (p. 285) and further, it demands that children reflect upon their own involvement in various media cultures. Interestingly enough, the ability to think critically is *exactly* the skill Sandy Hingston claims she wants her children to develop (p. 89). The incongruity, then, isn’t necessarily grounded in what adults want for young people but whether or not adults believe new media can play a role in ‘getting them there’. Haven’t Black, Jenkins, Kafai, and Gee, et al., thoroughly and effectively demonstrated that critical thinking, along with a multitude other significant practices, occurs within sites of popular/digital/new media cultures? And by extension, haven’t these authors invalidated CCFC’s flimsy contention that ‘excessive screen time’ causes, part and parcel, the erosion of creative play, imagination, and socialization? Certainly, those commentators who exult in youth-mediated centers of learning, in contrast to critics of popular culture, go far in disproving the idea that children are inherently weak and are manipulated by their interactions with media. The youths *themselves* demonstrate, via their shows of agency, that there is plenty of ‘humanity’ to be found there.

Rogow wonders how educators may “convey respect to our students” if our subtle message is “you are too naïve (or dumb) to understand the media” unless first clued in by a ‘knowledgeable’ adult (p. 284). It is essentially the same conundrum faced by the Oopma-Loompas while attempting to disseminate a message condemning popular media. Ultimately, Wonka’s workers found that only by plying children with limitless chocolate could they make their futile message seem palatable. Likewise, it would take a pretty amazing treat, and lots of it,

to convince millions upon millions of media-literate youths to relinquish their agency and kowtow to the prescriptive demands of adults representing the cause of media panic. Ironically, youths would truly have to be the sorts of zombies they're often portrayed as by new media critics in order to undergo such a reversal. In a show of old media-style poetic justice, I suppose that the greatest proof of all that popular media do *not* create mindless kids is the kids themselves refusing to be browbeaten—highbrow-beaten, that is—into giving up their BlackBerries, Apples, and any other “unwholesome and insipid fruits” they care to bite into.

“[W]e may...begin to ask: what are the varieties and complexities in juvenile media culture? Moreover...we may begin to change the perspective of the panics by respecting children’s own perceptions and asking for their evaluations of their media cultures. Asking such questions and respecting children’s answers does not necessarily imply a populist embrace of everything they say and the media they favour. But it does open a space of dialogue between adult and juvenile judgments, tastes and pleasures – a space that adults may learn as much from as children” (Drotner, p. 619).

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