THE EMERGENCE AND ETHICS OF CHILD-CREATED CONTENT AS MEDIA INDUSTRIES

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Introduction

This chapter seeks to unpack/unbox the evolving relationship between media industries and child-created content from a critical perspective. The profitability of content created for and by children on social media platforms such as YouTube has sparked an entire sector of content catering to young children. This chapter first looks at the cultivation of child ‘influencers’ as a part of the emergent digital media landscape and children’s media industries, including the emergence of entire genres such as ‘unboxing’ and the family vlogging phenomenon. The chapter, ultimately, delves into the conjoining of upstart digital child-created content with traditional, legacy media industries in the example of Ryan Toys Review and Pocket Watch. Following a media industries approach (Havens & Lotz, 2012), this research tracks how child-created content is part of an emergent digital economy.

Corporations have long viewed children as a target demographic, but with the success of child-created content, large companies are also investing heavily in marketing and content through mobile phones and connected viewing practices through and by children. This chapter aims to provide a broad overview and mapping of the current landscape of child-created children’s entertainment and media, including the rise of very young children as influencers. Child-created content is part of current and future media industries authorship, labour, and media consumption practices. Attention is paid to the political economy implications of a children’s media industry as well as the critical and social influences on conceptions of aspirational purchasing and marketing melding with the affordances of digital technology and platform design. Child-created content is also the site for discursively codifying particular articulations of concepts such as family or gender to reinforce purchasing and marketing norms within these sites.

The confluence of ubiquitous smartphone/mobile penetration, tactile user interfaces for accessing content, and parents using phones and screens as surrogate parenting tools have all resulted in platforms such as YouTube amassing hundreds of millions of views for child-created content and content targeted toward young children (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018). This surge in young viewers, a previously untapped market for digital platforms, led to investments in attempting to enclose and capture this perceived growth area for digital media companies and legacy
companies operating in the kids’ media space. YouTube, in particular, aggressively pursued this demographic by developing its own YouTube Kids app to assuage parental fears of children mixing with adult content.

Part of the work the YouTube Kids app performs is to corral young children into a controlled space without unexpected participation and play, where a more monolithic category of “child” or “kid” viewership can be codified and marketed to within the constraints of the app.

(Burroughs, 2017)

YouTube continues to use the app as a space for building a relationship with young users that involves the consumption of YouTube content, often child-created content, and the calcifying of media practices within young children. These media practices and habits are expected to yield retention of children as platform-specific YouTube consumers in the long run.

In addition to social media channels and platforms such as “YouTube Kids”, digital streaming companies like Netflix and Amazon have invested heavily in producing targeted content. In 2016, Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos announced the company was “doubling down on kids and families”, increasing the number of original programmes from 15 to 35 (Flint, 2016). Amazon struck a deal with PBS in 2016 to stream PBS Kids programming on Amazon Prime (Koblin, 2016). HBO acquired the rights to Sesame Street in conjunction with the launch of their streaming service HBO Now (Owen, 2018). As Steve Youngwood, COO of Sesame Workshop, explains, “There’s no ambiguity that if kids and family is not an audience you serve, there’s going to be a limit to how many subscribers you’re ever going to have”. Youngwood asserts this claim because he believes that streaming services need to be increasingly attractive to an entire household of viewers in an on-demand media consumption culture. Disney is launching their streaming service Disney+, which will target children through Disney’s extensive catalogue of content and also extend existing properties to appeal to kids. These large digital media companies are increasingly targeting children through their major programming decisions.

The impact of Netflix and YouTube’s investment in children’s programming and child-created content has extended globally as the BBC announced in 2017 that they would invest $44 million in children’s programming and content to combat the encroachment by YouTube and Netflix into young viewership. “YouTube usage is particularly popular with younger UK children – 54% of those between five and seven and 73% of those between eight and eleven use YouTube” (Tran, 2017). Legacy toy company Mattel recognised YouTube’s connection to children and monetising that engagement by investing ten million dollars in advertising on the YouTube Kids platform (Schrank, 2017). Stemming from the success of child influencers like Ryan or Ryan Toys Review or FunToyzCollector and the unboxing genre, child-specific influencers spawn an entire economy of family vlogs and kids opening toys, presents, candy, and the ‘stuff’ of consumer culture and capitalist consumption. This child-created content is all directed towards children and the families of children, assembling a form of ‘aspirational labour’ (Duffy, 2017), which feeds from creators and audiences into larger corporate structures digitally and commercially.

**Labour, Learning, and Playing**

Integral to the history of the children’s media industries are changes in labour laws, the romanticisation of childhood, educational philosophies about learning and play, and, of course, toys. Children have long been a source of cheap labour. As early in America’s history as 1791, Alexander Hamilton insisted that children should be put to work. Not only could nimble fingers and
fast feet help American manufacturers compete with British textile imports, but work was also deemed good for children “who would otherwise be idle” (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 4). A Puritan notion of childhood insisted that manual labour “kept [children] from idleness andrambling, and of course from early temptations to vice, by placing them for a time in manufactories” (Coxe, 1794, p. 55). Mass immigration of the late-19th and early 20th centuries infused burgeoning labour markets with children ready to work for low wages (Rosenberg, 2013). By 1890, 20% of children under the age of 16 made up 20% of the total U.S. workforce (Rosenberg, 2013).

Early children’s media occupations included ‘telegraph boys’ who rode bicycles around city streets to deliver messages, telegraph operators running small outposts in rural towns, Pony Express riders and other ‘messenger boys’, and ‘newsboys’ selling newspapers and magazines on street corners and trains. Girls also participated, though at a much smaller scale – many believed the exposure to seedy scenes inherent in the life of messengers would lead to prostitution, for instance (Rosenberg, 2013). Children have thus been central to American media, though their 18th- and 19th-century roles often focussed on the distribution rather than production of content. Under the banner of street trades, this type of media labour was regulated long after mining and factory work (Clopper, 1912).

Changes in labour laws in the 20th century and the rise of the middle class contributed to the romanticisation of childhood. Childhood was increasingly constructed as innocent and in need of both protection and education (Mintz, 2004). As children transformed from ‘useful’ to ‘priceless’ (Zelizer, 1994), their newfound sentimental value made them increasingly valuable on the silver screen (Addison, 2015). Child film stars grew in prominence and popularity in the 1910s and 1920s. “As children were removed from the workforce”, historian Gary Cross argues, “parents increasingly saw play as the core activity of childhood” (Cross, 1997, pp. 123–4). Therefore, in order to defend children’s labour in Hollywood and avoid legal complications, parents and fan magazine discourse “insisted that the efforts of child stars were a form of recreation” – in other words, work was successfully framed as play (Addison, 1252). A paradox emerged: “they were child labourers paid to represent the new sentimentalised view of children. They worked to portray the useless child” (Zelizer, 1994, p. 95). Though paradoxical, the innocence and purity of child stars were crucial to maintaining the virtue of a film industry that was, particularly in the 1920s, plagued by scandal (Addison, 2015). Keeping the at-time millions of dollars in profit out of the hands of child stars was justified on the basis that the kids were happy with a menial allowance and that paying them in full would do nothing but spoil them (Addison, 2015). The California Child Actor’s Bill, aka the Coogan Act, passed in 1938, forced parents to set aside half of their child star’s earnings (Zelizer, 1994).

The gradual disappearance of child labour and the rise of Hollywood birthed another industry key to understanding children’s media: toys. “Play had become the ‘work’ of children. And work required tools”, argues Cross (p. 129). The toy industry answered. In the 1930s, Shirley Temple and Mickey Mouse dolls exploded in popularity – both extended blockbuster fame into the daily lives of small children (Cross, 1997). As children’s roles in physical labour continually weakened, their purchasing influence as consumers of toys and media strengthened. Toys have since remained in a symbiotic relationship with legacy media. Concerns about children obtaining the benefits of labour and participatory culture have today led to calls for child rights in a digital age. Scholars and activists are fighting for children’s right to free speech, privacy, and self-identification – seeking to find the nuance between protecting the innocent from dangers online and empowering future generations (Livingstone & Third, 2017).

Alongside debates over children’s media rights are renewed concerns with the child labour undergirding the production of reality television, family vlogs, and other YouTube channels based on child stars. Despite the changing nature of ‘work’ and the increasing profitability of young children on YouTube, laws surrounding child-created media content are noticeably
absent. The Fair Labour Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, which banned children under the age of 16 from work, remains the primary piece of legislative protection against child labour 80 years later. Included in the FLSA is the ‘Shirley Temple Act’ – an exemption for “any child employed as an actor or performer in motion pictures or theatrical productions, or in radio or television productions” – named after the famous child star who would otherwise have been prohibited from acting at the peak of her young career (The law, Sec. 213(c)(1)(A)(ii), p. 33). In short, Congress decided that acting is not labour because it does not constitute oppressive labour and it gives children the opportunity to develop talents and skills beneficial to their future success (Podlas, 2010).

All of this has led us to a current moment wherein children are increasingly at the centre of popular media content generating enormous amounts of money, and yet little protection against exploitation exists. Capturing someone on camera – whether for a news broadcast of a public event, a documentary, or a family YouTube channel – does not inherently qualify as ‘work’ under current legal definitions (Podlas, 2010). Because entertainment laws regarding children are primarily decided at the state level, 17 states have essentially zero regulation of child entertainment labour (U.S. Department of Labor 2020; Popper, 2016). Podlas argues that a focus on child labour excludes parents from needed critical attention, “enabling them to avoid responsibility and risk the welfare of their children” (Podlas, 2010, p. 73).

The romanticisation of childhood and increased legal protection against dangerous physical labour has not removed young kids from the gears of the media industry machine; moreover, it has enabled them to become integral to the popularity and profitability of digital media today. Just as newssies of the 19th century were central to the distribution of daily newspapers, children going about their daily lives on camera are crucial to the production of contemporary media content.

Unboxing and Family Vlogs

Influencers or micro-celebrities have been studied by a growing number of scholars in relation to YouTube (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Lange, 2014; Senft, 2008). Additionally, there is a small but growing body of literature related to the monetisation of child-created content and digital parenting (Abidin, 2015; Burroughs, 2017; Smith & Shade, 2018). One specific strand of this literature relates to the emergence of unboxing videos as a specific genre of YouTube videos catering to children as an emergent demographic.

Unboxing refers to videos that show people (or just hands) opening and commenting on toys, candies, and children’s entertainment in the vein of a product review. Increasingly, unboxing videos lack any critical review function and instead show very young children or adults playing with the toys themselves or playing as a family. Nicoll and Nansen (2018) suggest that unboxing videos are sites of ‘mimetic participation’ that encourage commercialisation and play wherein children are “both sites and subjects of imitation within affinity spaces such as YouTube”. This acts as a simulation of how play could (or should) be modelled for younger viewers within digital platforms and apps. The child influencer, such as Evan on EvanTube HD, is positioned as a “cyberflâneur” (Marsh, 2016). These genres reinforce a capitalist logic of consumption articulated through the viewing of other children and families immersed in toys, games, and product placement. Unboxing can serve as a lynchpin, connecting affinity spaces with consumption practices through child-created content as “the industry views these children as conduits through which they can condition purchasing habits from birth. Unboxing videos act as a kind of mini-infomercial spurring aspirational purchasing” (Burroughs, 2017). And while Craig and Cunningham (2017) rightly point out that this form of ‘entrepreneurial labour’ by children and families is not necessarily “beholden to the commercial interests of the toy manufacturers or the platforms”,

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accounting for the increased agency provided by the affordances of social media, unboxing still serves to enmesh audiences within this emergent child-created media industry of digital labour.

Through these videos of consumption, the mobile phone and app technologies are the space of ‘sharenting’, defined as “sharing representations of one’s parenting or children online” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017). The entire family is wrapped in the production of these unboxing videos. This perpetuates a media environment targeted at children, where consumption is idealised and families are projected as constantly having an abundance of free products from their digital ‘labour’. Social media influencers are enabled to quit their ‘regular’ jobs and begin to fully rely on apps and social media accounts for their livelihood. Users compete for unique content and followers with the goal to receive paid partnerships. They manufacture this digital persona of posting approachable pictures and interacting with their fans, making it appear like they are care-free, without ever showing the audience the hard, laborious work that happens behind the scenes. Abidin (2017) labels this practice as ‘calibrated amateurism’ where families work to convince users “that these performers are ‘family’ before ‘influencers’” and cultivate “followers envy and pine after their craft, unity, and family spirit to the extent of wanting to emulate after them as #familygoals”. No worries, no family drama, and always already fun activities no matter where they are – a ‘perfect’ social media life and performance through the family vlog. The expertise and trust that is generated by the endorser has altered much of the modern consumer society, growing the perceived power of the influencer and the consumer’s brand attitudes. In turn, the relationship and proximity of children to unfiltered advertising continues to shrink.

**Ryan Toys Review and Pocket Watch**

The ongoing maturation of YouTube and increasing trust in the platform among advertisers, along with the emergence of new video genres explicitly aimed at children and families – such as unboxing videos and family vlogs – is opening new avenues for old media power to increase both corporate profits and ideological influence on younger and younger children. This has resulted in an industry built out of child-created content, now layered onto and integrated with traditional media industry logics. Ryan Toys Review is a site for understanding this emergent digital ecosystem, the importance of influencers catering to children, and the ethical dilemmas which arise from this shift in media industries. The rise of micro-celebrities and family influencers through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram is attracting the attention and money of traditional media and a variety of retailers. For decades television, film, and toy and clothing retailers have coordinated efforts to profit from children (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Cross, 1997). Toy companies and media producers mutually benefit from carefully calculated cross-promotional strategies. Child-created content – specifically YouTube kid stars – is the next iteration of brand integration.

At the time of this writing, the YouTube channel generating the highest number of views is not a Vevo-owned pop music star. It is Ryan Toys Review: a channel featuring a six-year-old boy unboxing new toys in his family living room from the view of his mom’s iPhone. While Ryan’s parents innocently describe the channel as “a little project that mommy and daddy do”, it has amassed over 16.5 million subscribers in less than four years, generated over 25 billion total video views, and produced $11 million dollars of revenue in one year (Schmidt, 2017). The focus is “Toys review for kids by a kid!” and the videos are relatively simple with regards to content, narrative, and production value (channel About page, 2018). Ryan receives a box of new toys, he opens them, plays with them, and then waves goodbye to his virtual fans – all with extreme excitement, sanguine smiles, and the token YouTube calls for viewers to like, subscribe, and keep watching. In the videos, Ryan is often playing with his parents and family with the toys, as the videos generally run between 10 and 15 minutes. Ryan Toys Review generally
produces a video every couple of days, so subscribers get to watch Ryan and his family open a new toy and play with a new toy as a family almost every day. While the family donates the excess to charity, the family is engaged in the formation of aspirational labour reinforced within Ryan’s audience. Ideologically, the channel represents the idyllic life for millions of distant toddlers on tablets and calcifies an orientation towards constant capitalist consumption through the family and through play – who wouldn’t want to open a box of brand new toys every day?

Parent reviews of the channel on the popular Common Sense Media website range from critiques of child manipulation to one commenter calling it a “plastic worshipping revenue machine kids creator”. Many use terms like ‘garbage’, ‘consumerism’, and ‘spoiled’ while another claims, more pointedly, “it’s not mindless, it’s insidious”. A somewhat unsettling theme emerges across review sites and video comment threads: thousands apparently loathe the channel for no other reason than the “super annoying voice” of Ryan’s mom (all quotes from www.commonsensemedia.org/youtube-reviews/ryan-toys-review/user-reviews/adult).

Critiques aside, Ryan’s innocuous influence is extending beyond YouTube. In the summer of 2018, Walmart launched a new toy line based on the Ryan Toys Review channel (the video of Ryan visiting the store with his parents to find the new toys for the first time has already been watched 10.5 million times). Within a highly gendered retail space, the dinosaurs, trucks, space guns, and surprise eggs are, of course, aimed primarily at boys. Importantly, the toys prominently feature Ryan as a character: wide-eyed, wide-mouthed, giving his soon-to-be iconic thumbs up. Walmart owns over 20% of the retail toy market share and is expected to reach $8 billion in toy sales soon (Fernandez, 2019). The line started as an exclusive deal with 2,500 Walmart locations but, by September, Target, another massive retail outlet with over 3% of the toy market, had also signed on to carry Ryan’s new merchandise. Retailers are increasingly partnering with social media influencers, but Ryan is the first YouTube child star to have his own toy line (Jones, 2018). Of course, the six-year old and his stay-at-home mom are not doing it alone. They are backed by a new digital marketing firm with deep roots in the children’s media industry, deep pockets, and decades of marketing and sales experience.

Pocket Watch launched in March of 2017, is based in Culver City, California, and currently has 40 full-time employees who are “paid to think and act like kids” (About page). The company is partnering with the biggest producers of child-created content on YouTube. Its line-up includes Ryan Toys Review, Captain Sparklez, Hobby Kids TV, and brother and sister channels EvanTube HD and JillianTube HD (each with myriad spinoff channels). The “new kind of entertainment company” ambiguously states it is “planting a flag for kids” in “today’s ever-expanding, shape-shifting entertainment universe” (About page). The company’s leadership includes CEO Chris M. Williams (former head of Disney Originals Online), Chief Content Creator Albie Hecht (former head of Nickelodeon) and Chief Strategy Officer Jon Moovnes (entertainment representative) – some of whom have grandkids apparently well-suited for exploitation. Moovnes’ bio, for instance, states that “Jon is the father of two great young women and pop to two amazing grandkids/target audience members”.

Pocket Watch is the latest iteration of aspirations to extend young YouTube micro-celebrity fame into traditional media structures. Many of the current Pocket Watch team first attempted to build a multi-channel network (MCN) with the launch of Maker Studios. An “uneasy collision between new and old media players” (Weiss, 2015), Maker Studios partnered with first generation YouTube stars (e.g., Pewdiepie and Shaytards) to tap into a subscriber base of nearly 400 million spread across 50,000 YouTube channels (Barnes, 2014). Initially, the future was bright as Disney purchased Maker Studios in 2014 for $500 million (with a promise to pay another $450 million if certain milestones were met). However, the company flopped shortly thereafter due to ‘internal dysfunction’ and a problem symptomatic of MCNs – without owning
video content MCNs can only collect advertising revenue when content plays on their channels (Patel, 2017). Pocket Watch emerged from the rubble of the crumbling Maker Studios acquisition with a tightened focus: child-created content. Nearly two-thirds of the company is made up of former Maker Studios/Disney staff – that is, television and film executives bent on leveraging their industry relationships and sales and marketing prowess to capitalise on fresh opportunities like Ryan Toys Review.

To avoid repeating the mistakes of Maker Studios, Pocket Watch is teaming up with the traditional media giant Viacom, who has invested several million dollars into forging a partnership. The aim of the partnership is to produce original content by children, for children – across various media platforms (Spangler, 2018). Pocket Watch and Viacom will, for instance, release a printed book featuring Ryan and other YouTube kid stars; and a contract with Paramount for the production of a feature-length unboxing film has been signed (Spangler, 2018).

The deals effectively cash in on the cultural cache of young YouTube stars by leveraging their authority across traditional media and further collapsing the perpetually diminishing distance between education and entertainment. The book, titled “Watch this Book!”, harnesses the neoliberal logics of YouTube, encouraging kids to watch and consume rather than read, engage, and question. Perhaps most important for the financial viability of the joint venture and more worrisome for parents is the agreement for Viacom to be the exclusive third-party advertising agent on Pocket Watch YouTube partner videos. The move gives the vast and varied brands under the Viacom umbrella (Nickelodeon being one key example) direct and unfiltered advertising access to young children.

Taken together, the emergence of companies like Pocket Watch means a heightened focus on character-based development – using children, living their lives, as characters, of course. Six-year-old Ryan is, again, illustrative. The excitable and charismatic Asian-American boy can, under Pocket Watch’s model, be developed as a ‘character’ adaptable to short-form video, a feature-length film, broadcast/streaming television, printed children’s books, and toy and clothing retail. Ryan (and others who will inevitably follow in his footsteps) is on his way to becoming an icon of the new children’s media sphere, both inescapable and aspirational, well before he reaches adolescence.

Conclusion

A multitude of questions involving the ethics of child-created content and media industries remain. New communicative technologies and their accompanying media industries have long served as a flashpoint for competing cultural values, hopes, and fears with regards to children. As Lynn Spigel (1992) notes, “More than any other group children [are] singled out as the victims of the new pied piper” (p. 50). Nansen, Chakraborty, Gibbs, MacDougall, and Vetere (2012) assert the need to “equip children with the knowledge and skills to be active, ethical and critical participants online” (p. 237). Ultimately, the question of safeguarding “children’s rights in relation to dataveillance” (Lupton & Williamson, 2017) remains of paramount importance, especially as the boundaries between children, brands, and influencers continually shrink.

The initial promise of YouTube as a discourse of “empowerment”, where anyone could make, share, and even become a “YouTube Star” or “influencer”, is reified through child-created content. YouTube’s Kids, like Ryan, engage in productive practices of production and disseminate that production to audiences, but YouTube’s Kids, like Ryan, also open new toys seemingly every day. They remain intertwined in a system where watching and witnessing perpetuates capitalist consumption. But potentially more worrisome is that an entire generation growing up watching this mode of consumption reinforces the pernicious promise of YouTube
that anyone can be like Ryan through consumption and play. Anyone can find fulfilment and joy through constant consumption. Child-created content is not just a potential future for digital media industries, it is the present of children and media. After all, who doesn’t want to be Ryan and why can’t my family be more like his?

References


