



Successful seminars on sexualisation

The *Australian Council on Children and the Media*, in alliance with *Kids Free 2B Kids* presented two very successful seminars on the sexualisation of children in and by the media, in Melbourne in early August.

Two hundred people attended the public seminar, *Bratz, Britney and Bralettes: The sexualisation of childhood* on August 3 at Melbourne Girls Grammar School. They heard from three leading advocates on the issue, Julie Gale, Founding Director of *Kids Free 2B Kids*, Steve Biddulph, well known author and family psychologist and Maggie Hamilton author of *What's Happening to Our Girls? Too Much, Too Soon, How Our Kids are Overstimulated, Oversold and Oversexed*.

The evening was chaired by well known psychologist Dr Michael Carr-Gregg. A survey of those in attendance revealed that at least 95% strongly agreed that there can be significant harms for children from this sexualised environment and 98% strongly agreed that more needs to be done.

On August 4, a full day seminar, *Children and Sexualised Media: Risks, reviews and regulation*, held at the Australian Education Union building, Abbotsford was attended by over 60 people including representatives of the media, health and education professionals, advertisers, regulators, and community organizations. This seminar was chaired by Dr Glenn Cupit from the School of Education, University of South Australia.

In his introductory remarks, Alastair Nicholson AO, former Chief Justice of the Family Court, suggested four steps that could be taken:

- (1) incorporate the relevant principles and provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law
- (2) set up an office of Children's Commissioner at a federal level
- (3) set up a tribunal with teeth to replace the Australian Communications and Media Authority
- (4) give the Advertising Standards Board and Australian Classification Board appropriate coercive powers and ensure they are properly staffed to act on their own volition rather than waiting for complaints.

Several speakers outlined issues of harm for children

Julie Gale, founding director of *Kids Free2B Kids*, dressed for the occasion in "clothes borrowed from my 14-year-old-daughter" – ultra high heels, tight and sequined clothing and playboy bunny ears.

She spoke about the problems she encounters, and her work in fighting for the removal of offending billboards and other graphic material.

Rita Princi, a consulting psychologist, focused on the detrimental developmental effects of sexualised media on even very young children.

Bernadette McMenamin AO, CEO of Childwise highlighted the increasing problem of pornography and its involvement of, and availability to, children both in Australia and globally.

Family psychologist and author Steve Biddulph, talking about the problem as 'a war on our girls', expressed his belief that the sudden rise in the sexualisation of young girls, primarily as a vehicle to sell products worth billions of dollars a year, is the biggest issue facing modern childhood



Speakers at the evening seminar from left: Michael Carr-Gregg, Julie Gale, Steve Biddulph & Maggie Hamilton.

The afternoon presentations focused on what has been done and what more needs to be done.

Dr Emma Rush, formerly of The Australia Institute, and co-author of the 2006 reports *Corporate Paedophilia*, and *Let children be children* explained the reasons for that research and the outcomes of the reports. One of the Australia Institute's recommendations was for a specialist children's interest unit within a media regulator with a brief to monitor children's interests across all media.

Industry representatives reviewed what is and has been done to combat the problem of sexualized media and to regulate advertising. Scott McLellan, CEO of the Australian Association of National Advertisers explained the AANA codes and actions and his belief in the efficacy of voluntary codes. Fiona Jolly, CEO of the Advertising Standards Board talked about what the Board has done, and is doing, in this area.

Former Senator, Lyn Allison a key member of 2008 Senate Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children spoke about the outcomes of, and expectations from, this inquiry. The Senate Committee report stated that it would review the issues in 18 months time (December 2009). Some 14 months on, the Government has yet to give its response to the Senate report, and the Minister's office was unable to supply anyone to speak on the issues.



Julie Gale, dressed for the occasion.

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SUCCESSFUL SEMINARS

RESOURCES

FAMILIES REJECT VIOLENT GAMES

TEENS & MEDIA

CODE OF PRACTICE REVIEW

SAY NO 4 KIDS



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small screen

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In reviewing possibilities for future action, Dr Cordelia Fine from the Centre for Applied Philosophy & Public Ethics, University of Melbourne, discussed her research on what cognitive science tells us about the way in which marketing influences us, and the implications of this for marketing to children.

Her research review had found that older children can be just as influenced by advertising as younger ones. Media literacy as a solution is not promising.

Elizabeth Handsley, Professor of Law at Flinders University and Vice-President of the Australian Council on Children and the Media, found the Senate Inquiry into the Sexualisation of Children Report to be ineffective by proposing to leave the advertising and media industries to self-regulate on this issue. She was critical of the AANA revision to its Code of advertising and marketing to children in regard to the sexualisation of children, arguing that the added clauses would not moderate the real problems. She called for the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to be given greater powers, and supported Alastair Nicholson's earlier suggestions.

Professor Ann Sanson (Network Coordinator, ARACY) provided figures from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to show that we are not doing well on wellbeing. She pointed to what media portrayals of children have to say about the way our society values children and youth.

The day concluded with a panel session, allowing time for audience comments and questions. Suggestions that it was time we abandoned the test of "community standards" as the arbiter in regulatory issues, were met with applause. Tests related to harm were seen as a better measure. There was much impatience about the Government's lack of response on the issues, and support for the Senate Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts to review progress on the community's concerns.



CHOICEZ MEDIA RESOURCES

cyber survivor

A three-part DVD and web-based resource addressing Internet safety and cyber bullying for schools, parents and young people. Topics include why young people bully, types of technology and their use, and consequences.

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A comprehensive DVD and print resource for use in the classroom by teachers working with female students. It includes a DVD program, teacher manual, and a workbook/journal.

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A book for parents who want to understand how pornography works and what they can do to help young men better understand the ways in which pornography can powerfully impact their relationships and their future.

<http://www.choicez.com.au>

NEW BOOK

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Edited by Sharna Olfman



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<http://www.freetv.com.au/>

Responsibility goes off the air

Don't humiliate kids for radio ratings, writes **Melinda Tankard Reist**

THE lie detector incident on 2Day FM involving a 14-year-old girl who revealed she had been raped at age 12 was not a case of a radio stunt going horribly wrong as some have put it. It was horribly wrong before it even started.

Austereo's Kyle Sandilands and Jackie O had planned to interrogate a child about sex and drugs on live radio. That was ethically questionable even before the shattering disclosure.

A vulnerable girl, at risk and deserving of protection, became a media plaything. Listening to the audio of the girl's live-to-air ordeal is like witnessing a forced confession.

Jackie O: Has she told you she's had sex before or do you think she's a virgin?

Michelle (mother): ... I think she might have had sex before.

Jackie O: All right, we have her hooked up to the lie detector.

Kyle Sandilands: Ohhhh!

Jackie O: She's not happy!

Sandilands: How are you Rachel?

Rachel: I'm scared. It's not fair.

[She is asked about sex.]

Rachel: I've already told you about this and don't look at me and smile because it's not funny! Oh, OK! I got raped when I was 12 years old!

Sandilands: Right. And is that the only experience you've had?

Michelle: I only found out about that a couple of months ago. Yes, I knew about that.

Rachel: And yet you still asked me the question.

While it is Rachel who is the one on trial, her answers resonate with truth and an insight lacking in her interrogators. Astonishingly Sandilands tries to gouge more from her as though the rape of a child is just one item in a buffet of possible sexual experiences. She is silent. Suffering the forced violation of her body, her abuser walking free for the past two years, she is given an on-air mauling; her human rights violated a second time. It didn't matter that she was scared. Nothing should stand in the way of a young girl's public shaming and the audience's titillation.

Jackie O said the team never intended to stage a "sick stunt". "There is no way we would want to go down that path or put that girl in that situation," she said. But Jackie, you did put her in that situation.

Research shows that sexually active children of this age are often dealing with serious problems such as family breakdown and parental dysfunction, substance abuse, psychological problems and coerced sex. The radio show hosts barging in with their intimidating lie detector were never going to be

able to sensitively handle any of this. Sandilands seems unable to accept responsibility for what happened. It's all about nasty people out to get him and spoil his fun show.

This episode is not an unfortunate slip-up. The program has a sordid history of sexual stunts. According to *MediaWatch*, in past lie detector episodes "contestants have had their honesty tested on subjects like STDs, masturbation, anal sex, threesomes and eating faeces during sex." One lie detector segment featured a man asked to identify his girlfriend's vagina from four naked women. On May 6, Sandilands and others (in a show syndicated around the country) held a competition in the station office to see who could masturbate the fastest and who had the largest sperm count. With armloads of porn, they were sent to cordoned-off toilets. One returned and wiped his "sticky" hand through Jackie's hair.

Perhaps someone should take another look at self-regulation. There's not much of it to be found in the Kyle and Jackie show where children like Rachel are preyed on, treated as mere fodder for entertainment and ratings.

Melinda Tankard Reist is the editor of *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls* to be released in September by Spinifex Press.

The Australian, 31 July 2009

A third of teens risking an early death

Ehssan Veiszadeh

MEDICAL researchers have warned of a "silent epidemic" among Australia's teenagers after a new study revealed almost a third of 14-year-olds faced an increased risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke.

The report, published today in *The Medical Journal of Australia*, also found a quarter of children aged eight were at an increased risk of obesity.

"Some people have said that the childhood obesity problem has been overplayed or exaggerated, but I don't think it's alarmist to say that we are actually experiencing an epidemic," the study's co-author Rae-Chi Huang, from the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, said.

The study examined a group of 14-year-olds and found 29 per cent had fallen into the high-risk category for "metabolic syndrome", a combination of disorders that enhances the prospect of suffering a heart attack, stroke or type 2 diabetes.

Dr Huang said the full effects of metabolic syndrome would not

Newly discovered genes point to doubled risk of melanoma

SCIENTISTS have discovered two new genes that together double a person's risk of developing melanoma.

As part of an international research project, a team of scientists from the Queensland Institute of Medical Research studied the genes of nearly 6000 people, together with their mole counts.

QIMR professor Nick Hayward said his team discovered two genes that increase melanoma risk by influencing the number of

moles a person has. In a follow-up study of a further 4000 people, the researchers went on to show the same two genes also increase the risk of moles developing into melanoma — the deadliest form of skin cancer.

"It has long been known that having a large number of moles is the biggest risk factor," Professor Hayward said.

"Therefore we predicted we would find genes linking moles and melanoma.

"We now have conclusive

genetic evidence that having a large number of moles increases an individual's risk of developing melanoma."

The study found that people who carry one of these two gene variants from one parent have a 25 per cent greater chance of developing melanoma, and people who carry variants from both parents have double the risk.

Professor Hayward said the research would help develop screening techniques and ultimately allow scientists to

develop new therapies. "This finding improves our understanding of the genetics of melanoma and therefore the molecular pathways that lead to its development."

Australia has the highest incidence of melanoma in the world, with more than 10,000 new cases and 1000 people dying from the disease every year.

Queensland is the worst-affected state, with seven diagnoses each day. AAP

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The Australian, 6 July 2009

Child obesity figures are 'understated'

PUBLIC health experts have hit back at claims Australia's childhood obesity plague is a myth, with figures they say show the problem is actually understated.

In research published in yesterday's *Medical Journal Of Australia*, West Australian researchers including the Australian of the Year, Fiona Stanley, found that nearly a third of the children in the study were unhealthy due to their weight, diet and lack of exercise.

They found 29 per cent of 14-year-olds and 25 per cent of eight-year-olds were in a "high risk cluster" for future health problems such as heart disease, diabetes or stroke.

The lead author, Dr Rae-Chi Huang, from the University of Western Australia's school of medicine, said the study proved there was no room for complacency about child health.

It showed the problem was wider than just the 6 to 8 per cent of the child population who were officially classified as obese.

"It's not alarmist to say it's an epidemic," she said. "It's a strange epidemic, because we are not going to reap all the full effects for many years."

Nick Miller

Sydney Morning Herald, 6 July 2009

Hopeful hosts go gaga

AUNTY has been on the hunt for presenters for its children's channel, ABC3, due to be launched later this year. And it's not a gig for the faint-hearted, judging by the ad: "Are you wild enough to walk with lions? Could you jam with Powderfinger, talk fashion with **Lady Gaga** or surf with **Layne Beachley**?" The deadline for applications fell yesterday afternoon, and not before time: *Streuth* hears that the ABC has been overrun with lollies, perfume and other gifts that have been attached to the applications of aspiring presenters hopeful of winning over the selection panel.

The Weekend Australian, 18-19 July 2009

Peddling youth booze

Alcohol advertising must not target young people

A NATION in which alcohol was once the local currency was bound to have problems with the consumption and culture of booze. We've come a lot further than rum and the rebellion it provoked, but the debate over the alcopop tax shows that we are a nation in denial. It skirted the central issues and primarily focused on the effectiveness of taxes, ignoring the elephant in the room.

In a fundamental cultural shift, cigarette smokers are now pariahs, but binge and out-of-control drinkers are often tolerated, to the disadvantage of countless Australians. What is needed is a candid debate about the role alcohol plays in this nation. Without serious intervention, alcohol abuse is not going to fade away. The NSW Government's 2008 Summary Report on Adult Health from the NSW Population Health Survey revealed that risky drinking has fallen in all age groups since 1997, with the exception of 16 to 24-year-olds. About 50 per cent of young people drink at risky levels.

In order to change the binge-drinking culture among younger people, we must target the nexus between advertising and sport. Almost on a weekly basis we read about some footballer accused of alcohol-related misdemeanours, from antisocial behaviour to criminal assaults. The self-destruction of Andrew Symonds's career as a Test cricketer is a jarring example of the synergies between drinking and sport.

There is a huge disconnect between the sophisticated use of alcohol advertising and sponsorship associated with sporting events, and the grim reality of alcohol abuse. Alcohol companies dangerously associate their product with success, athleticism, sexual conquest and popularity. The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy has attempted to work co-operatively with the alcohol advertising industry during the past five years to improve the system of self-regulation, yet there is little evidence that industry has paid much heed to its recommendations.

Alcohol companies, like the rest of corporate Australia, have the right to advertise and promote legal products in line with agreed standards. But we cannot shy away from the evidence that the alcohol industry has done little to ensure that its advertising is handled responsibly or even complies with its own standards.

The best changes to regulation are always the ones made in consultation with key stakeholders; nevertheless, fundamen-

ROSS FITZGERALD



tal change is urgently needed. NSW offers a useful way forward with a national action plan on alcohol advertising. The proposal includes establishing an independent regulatory body with compulsory participation and vetting all alcohol advertising. It would regulate the content, volume and location of advertising.

Until such a body commences work, action needs to be taken to stop poor advertising practices. Interim measures could include targeted bans on billboards near schools, in cinemas that show alcohol advertisements during films certified for under-18s, and in youth magazines.

The complex and contentious issue of sponsorship also needs to be tackled. Restrictions disallowing alcohol advertising on TV between 5am and 8.30pm should be extended to include live sporting broadcasts. Governments need to be careful that any bans do not undermine the capacity of communities to conduct sporting and other events. But there is a justifiable concern that badging or promotion associated with alcohol sponsorship at events for junior sports or young people can be seen to encourage underage and irresponsible drinking.

NSW has this month advocated that the commonwealth could establish a fund to sponsor community organisations that provide sporting and cultural activities as an alternative to alcohol sponsorship. This could be included in the national action plan and be funded from alcohol taxation. Our primary concern should not be a blanket ban on the alcohol industry providing sponsorship. The key issue is what such sponsorship purchases in terms of signage and promotions. The alcohol and advertising industries must agree not to target Australians under the age of 18 and not to send inappropriate messages about the alleged benefits of alcohol consumption, especially to men and women under 24 years of age.

If we are to move to a sustainable approach beyond the alcopops tax, the NSW initiative deserves a closer look.

The Australian, 28 July 2009

Everything old is new again to nostalgic, internet-weary young adults

Stephen Lunn
Social affairs writer

NEXT thing you know, all the young men will be using Brylcreem, the girls will be in bobby sox and everyone will be learning to jitterbug.

A study of young adult culture reveals a "new nostalgia" among Australia's 16-30 year olds, who pine for less complex times.

Communicating with friends online has lost some of its lustre even from as recently as a year ago and they now want to have more face-to-face time.

And they increasingly prefer to do that at home rather than going out to noisy, potentially dangerous pubs and nightclubs, according to the annual Urban Market

CULTURAL SHIFT

Changing habits of 16 to 30-year-olds, 2008 to now

- **\$35** – entertainment spending down a month
- **4.4 hours** – time spent watching free-to-air TV a week; down 1.3 hours
- **\$36** – expenditure on music a month; down \$6
- **5 hours** – time spent watching DVDs and videos
- **4 hours** – watching pay TV
- **45%** – will visit nightclubs; down 5%
- **69%** – will visit pubs; down 4%
- **\$200** – money spent on fashion; down \$16
- **8.6 hours** – time spent on internet weekly; down 30 minutes
- **1.9 hours** – time spent reading newspapers weekly; up 30 minutes
- **70%** – percentage who say they would consider a tattoo in the next five years
- **23.7%** – females who say they would consider cosmetic surgery in the next 5 years; up from 19.4%

Source: Urban Market Research

Research survey compiled by youth marketing agency Lifelounge. The survey of more than 1600 young adults finds those still living with their parents (about half) have noticed the global

financial crisis's impact on the family and pared back their lifestyle in response. It also shows their love affair with technology is heading for a break-up, with time spent online down 30 minutes a

week from last year, while their consumption of newspapers increased by the same amount. Facebook and Twitter are also still on the rise, but losing some of their cachet. Lifelounge chief

cont'd P5

WITCHES TAKE TO THE INTERNET.

SCHOOL GIRLS AND SALEM'S SISTERHOOD

BY JEANETTE LINDSAY

The Adelaide Review, July 2009

Recent revelations of vicious bullying at elite Ascham School in Sydney's Edgecliff have revealed how far some girls are prepared to go in their use of the website MySpace to attack classmates.

Posted on the website were humiliating personal details of 31 named girls, describing and commenting on their supposed sexual behaviour, as well as details of their social and drug and alcohol excesses. The named girls were subsequently subjected to further humiliation by unpleasant approaches from boys.

The school, once alerted, acted expediently and the two year nine students (SA Year 10) behind the incident left the school. However, did they learn a sharp lesson from being exposed, or was the problem simply relocated elsewhere? Certainly the victims of such cruelty and intimidation are very likely to be marked for life by the experience. Also social networking sites such as Facebook ensure notoriety and widespread dissemination of the damage to and humiliation of victims. Bullying by text message has been taken a step further.

The Minister for Communications, Stephen Conroy, is setting up a youth advisory group of 305 students aged 11 to 17 to explore strategies to combat cyber bullying.

However schools, both state and independent, have put in place many measures

to combat the kinds of ugly behaviour encountered daily by so many students. Yet it is still happening. Why it is happening needs to be addressed, along with the way technology is being used by some to harm their peers.

In addressing *how* this is taking place, it is essential to establish *who* is doing it and *why*. Who are the teen queens of the culture who take power and control over the social milieu, and how do they gain the numbers of followers to do so? What sets the agenda for the peer group in this culture? Why are some girls forced into the role of victims by exclusion, becoming outcasts from the dominant group? In a school such as Ascham, all the students are seen by the outside world as members of a privileged and wealthy elite.

Yet one of the girls targeted was abusively described as looking like a koala, a derogatory image which is hard to live with when appearance is such a focus, indeed a commodity.

Frightened girls can come to believe that the staff are on the side of the bullying alpha females because those girls tend to be rewarded with leadership roles in a school.

Setting up mediation with guided and supported confrontation of the bully by the victim merely reinforces the victim's inadequacy in asserting herself. She will fail.

Three powerful drivers are behind the trend. The

first is the availability and technological expertise gained by young who have unlimited access to social networking when their use of the internet is not monitored by responsible parents. Lack of a moral compass or a convincing value system to accompany technical skill is not attracting condemnation. It is seen as the exercise of freedom, and as the reinforcing of power and superiority by the culture.

Secondly, popular TV shows have developed reality television around the idea of some participants being excluded, voted out or forced to leave the group, as with the Big Brother house. Personal abuse and rejection are seen as entertainment. Much of the attacking strategy for the Ascham abuse came from the now deleted mspace.com/gossipgirl-sydney website.

The third aspect has wider implications when viewed from the perspective of the rugby league sex scandals which have troubled the sports world. How civilised is our society really? Is primal psychology accountable for what amounts to gladiatorial behaviour on the field, and rapacious sexual conduct off it?

Young girls and women who bully are in all likelihood at a primal level dealing with young female rivals to vanquish them from the competition for the best and most eligible breeding males.

Watching *Meerkat Manor* can be quite instructive in understanding manifestations of tribal behaviour in the school environment. Exercising power within the social milieu is more than just an imperative for survival, it carries with it a fierce urge to dominate and banish rivals, just like the meerkats.

Or are these girls simply sociopaths with a narcissistic personality disorder? Calling them 'mean girls', as the Sydney Morning Herald did in a recent headline, simply reinforces their dominance of the subculture and validates them in the role of harassers of cyber victims.

American teen chick-lit popularising spite as motivation is re-defining the lifestyle perspectives of some girls, for example in the writing of Cecily von Ziegesar, with her *Gossip Girl* novels, Lisi Harrison's *Clique* series and Zoey Dean's *The A-List*. The social mindspace in these novels is petty and destructive, delighting in ways to conduct cruel mind games.

Teen spite and destructiveness flourishes because the bullies, male and female, do not observe or recognise boundaries. Ultimately, parents hold the only power to contain them, and it is social and economic power.

Jeanette Lindsay has been a teacher at Ascham School and was formerly mistress for girls at Westminster School.

First three years key to school success: study

Adele Horin

HOW children are faring before they turn four is a strong guide to early school success, according to a major study. It is more important than what happens to them in the year immediately before they start school.

The Federal Government has promised to provide 15 hours a week of free preschool for the nation's four-year-olds. But the study indicates the importance Government's guarantee of a year of preschool was important, especially for children with no experience of child care.

"But investment before the age of four is also important for child development."

The study also found children who spent longer hours in child-care centres in their first three years were more likely to experience behaviour problems in their first year at school than those who spent shorter hours in care. The

of investment in the earlier years, too.

The *Child Care Choices* study is unique in Australia for having followed an initial group of children - more than 670 - from child care to school for six years.

The team of researchers, led by Jennifer Bowes of Macquarie University's children and families research centre, focused on children who used some formal child care - usually long-day-care centres - and did not include long-hours children on average also showed less kindness and empathy than those who had spent shorter hours in care.

The study, which is mostly funded by the NSW Department of Community Services, has not yet established what number of hours triggered the negative effect of child care on behaviour and empathy.

But international studies have found 30 hours a week to be significant, especially for children

children cared for exclusively by parents, nannies or other carers.

It found that how children are faring at ages one, two and three is a good predictor of how they will perform in their first year at school in literacy and numeracy, and in their social behaviour. Those who had shown behaviour problems at child care and home early in their development were at risk of continuing the pattern at school.

"It indicates children's relationship under one. Because only 11.8 per cent of Australian mothers with preschool age children work full-time, only a small minority of very young children spend long hours in formal child care.

The combination of formal child care with some care by grandparents, friends, or relatives helped children's later adjustment to school, the study showed. There was also strong evidence that having had a close relationship with child-care

ships and attitudes to learning are established very early on in life," Professor Bowes said.

As well, the study showed the children who did well in numeracy in the first year of school had already shown an aptitude for numerical concepts from about age three, and had fewer early social problems; and those doing well at literacy had fewer early social problems, and also had fewer siblings.

Professor Bowes said the workers was important for a child's later behaviour at school and development of empathy.

Professor Bowes said the relationship between children and child-care workers was "central" to children's social development. "Spending time with individual children is very important to a child-care worker's job," she said.

The findings will be presented at the Australian Social Policy conference at the University of NSW this week.

Sydney Morning Herald, 6 July 2009

Everything old is new again to nostalgic, internet-weary young adults *cont from p4*



Nostalgia: Clothing designers Clea Garrick and Nathan Price at their Fitzroy studio in Melbourne yesterday

Picture: Stuart McEvoy

executive Dion Appel said: "Nostalgia and simplicity ... (are) influencing the styles they're adopting, the products they're purchasing and their entertainment choices.

"Parents' vinyl records are suddenly interesting and vintage clothes are de rigueur.

"And they want more connections with their friends that aren't digital, that are tangible. They're

starting to question the authenticity of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

"They want technology to assist rather than dominate the way they communicate."

Overall, spending on music, entertainment, travel, fashion and sport is down more than \$5 billion in the year to March, from \$47.5bn to \$42.4bn, the study finds.

Melbourne clothing designer Clea Garrick, 27, said she and her friends had tended to step out of the fast lane over the past year, and were instead enjoying some of the simpler pleasures.

"We've definitely had more dinners at our house than we normally would, including a fondue party would you believe it?" said Ms Garrick, who is married

with no children. She agreed there was now a greater emphasis among her peers for human contact rather than online connections than a year ago. "Facebook, for sure, we've dropped our usage," she said. "It's just a time-commitment issue: how do you want to be spending your time?"

The study found declines in time spent on the internet (down almost half an hour from last year to 8.6 hours a week) and free-to-air television viewing, down 1.3 hours to 4.4 hours a week.

But they average another five hours a week watching DVDs and four hours on pay TV.

One fad young adults are yet to tire of is tattoos, with 70 per cent saying they would consider getting one in the next five years.

The Australian, 14 July 2009

In young students' minds computers are toys, not tools

A YEAR and a half ago I drove out to a small rural town in North Carolina to talk to the leaders of a public school agency. The details of my talk are quite another story, but suffice to say that they had nothing to do with students and computers. At the time, though, I was assembling a research paper with a strong and sturdy result: when students gained access to computers at home, their reading and maths test scores declined. When high-speed internet service arrived in their postcode, their scores declined still further.

Imagine my surprise, then, when the school superintendent told me that he intended to scrap his textbook budget for the upcoming year and purchase laptop computers for his sixth-grade students. As my work was still quite preliminary at that point, I spared the superintendent a stern lecture on the folly of his idea.

Eighteen months and thousands of kilometres later, I'm still learning about the fanciful notions harboured by public officials in many nations regarding the importance of providing students universal access to computers. From Maine to Melbourne, and from New Orleans to NSW, government officials have pledged public dollars to erasing the "digital divide", the alliterative moniker for the gap in access to computers between rich and poor children.

The case for using public funds to buy

An education revolution based on providing laptops to teenagers won't improve standards; in fact, computer use could reduce academic performance, argues Jacob L. Vigdor

children computers, whether for school or home use, sounds quite sensible when you first hear it. Many, if not all, of the well-paying jobs of the 21st century will require basic computer skills. A widely read economic study from 1993 found that workers who used computers on the job earn significantly more than those who do not. Computer technology can assist students in learning at their own pace, using sophisticated software algorithms to determine which children need more advanced or more basic instruction. Computers can bring the resources of the world's largest libraries to even the most remote outpost.

Proponents of public subsidies for computer purchases can point to some very basic evidence to support their cause. Any comparison of students who have computers at home to those who do not is bound to reveal that the students with access to computers perform better in school.

How could such a plausible argument, backed by basic evidence, be wrong? Let's take the last piece of evidence first. Computers are less important than food, shelter, and clothing. Poor families, as a consequence, will generally see to their basic needs before investing in a luxury such as a home computer.

The simple comparison of children with and without home computers, then, is fundamentally a comparison of rich and poor families. Children of the wealthy do better at school, but not necessarily because of access to computers. They most likely also have more books, better-educated parents, and in many cases access to superior schools.

The prominent 1993 study of computers in the workplace was itself debunked by a 1997 study, which found that workers who used pencils on the job earned more than those who did not. Desk jobs tend to pay more, whether there is a computer on the desk or not.

Reports of computers' positive effects, in sum, have been greatly exaggerated. Why should we believe, though, that the true effects are negative? The basic problem is that the modern computer is much more than a tool for productivity. It is also a tool for entertainment. Expecting a 12-year-old to use a computer for productivity only, and not for diversion, is as unreasonable as expecting him or her to watch only educational programs on television, or to use the telephone solely for emergencies. We, the rational adults, know that the productive use is best in the long run. The teenage brain, however, is wired to ignore the long run. The

cont

prefrontal cortex, that portion of gray matter devoted to evaluating the long-range consequences of present actions, is not fully open for business until age 25 or so.

This simple neurological fact helps make sense of the results of my study (which is co-authored with two of my Duke colleagues, Charles Clotfelter and Helen Ladd). To infer the impact of computer ownership on basic academic skills, we tracked survey information provided by students in North Carolina public schools as they progress from age nine to 14. About one in every 10 students, among the hundreds of thousands in our sample, report having no computer in their home when they are young, but acquire one as they age. We compared the reading and maths test score performance of these acquirers, relative to their peers, before and after the computer arrived in their household. We performed a similar before-and-after comparison to gauge the impact of the introduction of broadband service in each student's postcode. Our strategy of using before-and-after comparisons helps us avoid the mistakes of earlier studies, which confuse computer ownership with the other benefits of wealth.

Across the board, we estimated negative

impacts. Not catastrophically negative, but clearly inconsistent with the view that students use home computers and the internet primarily to further their studies. Interestingly, the results were also consistent with earlier research on the subject of computer use in classrooms, which has also struggled to find any positive impact.

How ought a conscientious parent (and taxpayer) react to this news? Don't throw out junior's computer just yet. Realise, however, that from an adolescent's perspective, a computer is a toy that also happens to have some school-related uses, rather than the other way round. If left to his or her own devices, your child will most likely find novel and interesting ways to waste time with a computer. The solution is not so much to remove the computer as to avoid leaving junior to his or her own devices.

From a policy perspective, subsidising computer access, without stipulating the adult supervision that needs to go with it, is not a recipe for academic success. As in so many cases, the proper recipe includes a healthy portion of adult instruction and monitoring. My research indicates that you can't rely on every parent to provide this critical ingredient.

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The Australian, 27 July 2009

Good week for . . .

KIDS who play physically active video games, such as Nintendo's Wii Sports: they offer a workout as good as walking. Research compared the energy kids aged 10-13 expended when sitting watching television, treadmill walking or playing video games Dance Dance Revolution and Wii Sports. Energy expenditure while gaming was comparable to moderate-intensity walking. Compared with watching TV, the energy used while gaming or walking increased two to threefold, the study online in *Pediatrics* found.

Pediatrics

2009;doi:10.1542/10.1542/peds.2008-2851

(Graf D, et al)

The Weekend Australian, 25-26 July 2009

Kids' techno tastebuds in junk food fight

Simon Canning

ANTI-OBESITY campaigners have opened up a new front in the war on junk food advertising, calling on the federal government to step in and regulate marketing in emerging media including the internet and mobile phones.

Research conducted by the Centre for Behavioral Research in Cancer found the vast majority of consumers wanted mandatory restrictions imposed on SMS, email, web and pay-TV marketing to children, saying the media were being used as a loophole by marketers that have scaled back their presence on free-to-air TV.

Jane Martin, senior policy adviser to the Obesity Policy Coalition, said that with the number of children owning mobile phones, using the internet and watching pay-TV on the increase, marketers were finding new ways to promote their products.

"Fearing greater restriction of advertising on free-to-air TV, junk food companies are increasingly looking to other, less regulated, avenues," Ms Martin said.

"Our research shows there is overwhelming support for the government to also crack down on these forms of marketing."

Ms Martin said the use of games on websites was particu-

larly concerning. The survey found 91 per cent of consumers questioned wanted the government to regulate the use of games or competitions on websites.

"Many companies are using the premise of education or game-playing to lure children to their sites so they can promote their products," she said.

"The child is actually engaging with the brand without really knowing, and they are also encouraging repeat visits."

Fast food deny they are targeting children with their marketing messages, but Ms Martin cited a Hungry Jacks website that asks kids to join a club that was only

open to children aged under 12.

"These technologies are very direct and very targeted," she said. "These are integrated campaigns that are utilising these techniques and they are also very cheap, much cheaper than TV."

The survey found that 81 per cent of respondents wanted a complete ban on SMS or email advertising by junk food marketers, while 91 per cent were in favour of government regulation.

It also called for greater regulation of pay-TV advertising aimed at children.

"Junk food advertising on pay or subscription channels, particularly those popular with children,

is largely unregulated," she said.

"However, 87 per cent of consumers want the government to take action to regulate junk food advertising in this medium."

The call for greater regulation of food advertising to children comes as marketers battle for the right to continue to advertise their products on another front: a National Preventative Health Task Force recommendation last week reportedly called for a ban of alcohol sponsorship in sport.

Sporting code executives have warned that such a move would wipe \$300 million from their revenues and cripple both professional and amateur sport.

The Australian, 20 July 2009

Picture: Amos Ahlman

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