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For a long time, content has been a primary approach to media regulation. The content of dime novels, comic books, Saturday matinees, and television programs have variously been the focus of campaigns to regulate children's media consumption. When you visit the ACMA's (Australian Communications and Media Authority) website, you'll find the word "Content" features prominently. Content is often the lens through which the broad public is asked to view a wide range of media issues. In the 2008 *Byron Review*, a report commissioned by the UK Department on Children, Schools & Families, the terms of reference asked that the report review "the evidence on risks to children's safety and wellbeing of exposure to potentially harmful or inappropriate material on the internet and in video games" and to "help parents understand and manage the risks of access to inappropriate content." Content is the language and focus of regulation.

But, for media scholars, content has limited significance. Meaning is always developed in context and thus content and context need to be examined together. There are many layers of context that provide interpretive scaffolding with which individuals making meaning. When we speak of context we mean the social and individual, the historical, and the textual. The act making content meaningful is dependent upon cognitive and social processes. A regulatory focus on content alone is only able to capture part of the complex social processes that characterize our engagement with media and with one another through media and mediated exchanges. Sometimes laws account for context when they distinguish between public and private practices. Increasingly, however, newer media forms are challenging our standard and fundamental notions of public and private.

In association with challenges to our understanding of public and private is an opportunity to reconsider agency and autonomy as they have been alternately granted

to and circumscribed for children. When children (in industrialized societies) were removed from the workforce at the end of the 19th century, many other changes in their status followed. No longer producers, they are now only consumers. As individuals their autonomy was reduced and their agency circumscribed. Dependency has fed into a notion of vulnerability and children are often deemed to be *special in their vulnerability*. Children are thus only allowed to act on their own behalf in limited capacities.

Highlighting the limitations of regulation allows us to reorient ourselves to think about children's online lives, their agency, in different ways; to examine the challenge social networking software has for the well-established notions of public and private; and to reconsider how we use media to mediate between individuals, across generations and the public/private divide. When we situate media in space and place, we begin to account for context and we engage the social dimension that is implied in mediation between active agents.

The majority of literature on children, youth and online privacy falls into two main categories, both of which focus on risk. An early view focused on consumer privacy and held that online marketing was exploiting children by easily extracting information from them; the more recent, and now dominant, view is concerned with "secrecy, access, and the future risks that 'public living' (...) poses..." (Marwick, Diaz & Palfrey, 2010:10). Like media regulation's focus on content, a contemporary approach to care involves the language of risk management, whether the risk is perceived or actual. The risk that we are managing with respect to online activity, however, is not technological but social. The terms through which we confront the risk must account for action, agency, and autonomy.

We cannot rely on regulation or technology to ensure that children's experiences with media are positive, online or offline. Children, like adults, must be informed, educated, self-sufficient and self-managing participants in media culture. "Children and young people need to be empowered to keep themselves safe (...)" Children will be children – pushing boundaries and taking risks" (Byron, 2008:2).

We often think of learning as this process by which we acquire new information. Learning, however, is also a process by which one comes to a change of view - when new information conflicts with prior beliefs. Both of these processes, acquiring new information and adjusting existing beliefs, present challenges and difficulties.

How do children learn to be self-managing participants in media culture if we do not allow them the risk involved with learning? **Children will not learn from mistakes if filtering and blocking software prevent them from ever having to exercise judgment. If we place children inside a walled garden, we deny them the opportunity to practice the self-management and self-regulation skills that we want them to have.**

Unfortunately, the structures and conventions of journalistic reporting inflame public fears, inflate the need for concern and generate an atmosphere of urgency around new media. Often the social context is completely overlooked; not enough attention is given to the cultural practices in which technologies are or become embedded. Much of what poses as social concern is really techno fear. Discussions of autonomy and access, privacy and public participation are tainted by commonplace dystopian views of new technology and technological determinism (the practice of ignoring the social and cultural dimensions of media). The way that the press treated the sad and disturbing story of the late Carly Ryan is a case in point.

Ms. Ryan's body was found on 20th Feb. 2007. On the 23rd of Feb press across the nation, including ABC, were reporting the connection between her death and her MySpace page. On the 3rd of March two males (one adult, one minor) were arrested for her death. The next day (4th March), just two weeks after the body was found, and certainly before much investigation would have been disclosed, an editorial ran about online danger and began with the line: "The tragic case of murdered teenager Carly Ryan again highlights the unrelenting march of technology into our lives." This opening line positions the Internet as an invading force of troops on a path to conflict. On the 11th of March another article ran on "cyberthreat."

Ms. Ryan was an individual, not a number, not a representative for youth culture, and not a victim of technology. The news media, however, are not able to report on an individual case without verification and this rarely comes in the first days of an investigation. The restrictions are even more stringent when a minor is involved. The stories they report are the ones they are able to report. In this case the story "angle" was the role of technology. Agency was ascribed to technology and not to human beings. The role of technology was distorted.

21st century children, dependent upon their parents as they are, have little autonomy and opportunity to act as independent agents. Children today are monitored in a number of ways; they are under continual surveillance. Children, however, respond to having their online profiles and activities observed and monitored by becoming more secretive and more evasive of authority (Marwick et al, 2010: 15-20). Studies show that the more authoritative parents are, the less likely children are to share with them and discuss their online activities. In schools, rather than negotiate an understanding with students, filtering and blocking software prevent a range of

activities. As a consequence, children pursue the prohibited activities elsewhere, in the private spaces that young people can secure for themselves.

Another common mistake is to suggest that content is the lynchpin of online exchange. Posting photos and personal details do not, by themselves, increase a young person's online risk. Wolak et al (2008) explain how press coverage, like the articles following Ms. Ryan's death, distorts the magnitude of risk to young people and ultimately contributes to the development of inappropriate policies and strategies. The authors derive their conclusions from three large US studies: two Youth Internet Safety Surveys (2000 & 2005) and the National Juvenile Online Victimization Study (N-JOV).

They report the following:

Posting personal information online is widely regarded as putting youths at risk for victimization by online child molesters, but findings from the YISS-2 suggest that it is not, by itself, associated with being sexually solicited online

[B]etween June and October 2007, we conducted over 400 interviews with police about Internet-related sex crimes in conjunction with a second N-JOV Study, and we have yet to find cases of sex offenders stalking and abducting minors on the basis of information posted on social networking sites. **Online molesters do not appear to be stalking unsuspecting victims but rather continuing to seek youths who are susceptible to seduction** (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, in press; Ybarra et al., 2007:117, emphasis added).

Evidence suggests that we should take caution in linking the Internet to child molestation because several sex crime and abuse

indicators have shown marked declines while Internet use has been expanding. From 1990 to 2005, the number of sex abuse cases substantiated by child protective authorities declined 51%, along with other related indicators (Finkelhor, in press; Finkelhor & Jones, 2006, cited in Wolak et al, p. 121).

The authors conclude:

The publicity about online “predators” who prey on naïve children using trickery and violence is largely inaccurate. Internet sex crimes involving adults and juveniles more often fit a model of statutory rape—adult offenders who meet, develop relationships with, and openly seduce underage teenagers—than a model of forcible sexual assault or paedophilic child molesting. This is a serious problem, but one that requires approaches different from those in current prevention messages emphasizing parental control and the dangers of divulging personal information. Developmentally appropriate prevention strategies that target youths directly and acknowledge normal adolescent interests in romance and sex are needed. These should provide younger adolescents with awareness and avoidance skills while educating older youths about the pitfalls of sexual relationships with adults and their criminal nature. Particular attention should be paid to higher risk youths, including those with histories of sexual abuse, sexual orientation concerns, and patterns of off- and online risk taking. Mental health practitioners need information about the dynamics of this problem and the characteristics of victims and offenders because they are likely to encounter related issues in a variety of contexts (p.111).

If we continue to focus on content, to tell young people that posting photos of themselves is risky behaviour, without addressing the contextual dimensions of online presence and acknowledging children’s agency, we will not come to understand the complexity that results in a minority of young people having bad, and sometimes tragic, experiences.

People and social interactions must be the centre of our efforts. We need to focus on what people do with media, not what media do to them. If we care about the handful of young people who do have bad experiences online, then we need focus our attention on them, their experiences and their lives.

The ACMA published a research report last year entitled, *Click and Connect: Young Australians’ use of online social media* (2009). Pertinent to my remarks here is the timing of the research that informs the report. The qualitative aspects of the study (discussions, interviews, and online discussions) were undertaken in June of 2008, well after the nation had become familiar with the news coverage of the Ryan story. The report, however, fails to address or even note the significance of this timing.¹

With respect to the assumptions that are written into the report, they write: “The ACMA has a role in advising parents and carers about the supervision and control of children’s access to the internet...” Why the double-barrel of “supervision and control?” Have we had a referendum that demonstrated most Australian voters believe that children’s Internet access must be controlled? As Wolak et al have shown, the “current prevention messages emphasizing parental control and the dangers of divulging personal information” are inappropriate to the task. Again, we must ask, how will children learn to be self-monitoring, self-regulating and independent online if we contain their explorations to a walled garden scenario?

¹ I do not quote this study as an endorsement of its quality. To the contrary, a raft of basic errors, like misspelling “censor” (p.75) raise concerns for the overall quality and reliability of the research.

The most important finding of this study, as reluctant as I am to endorse it, is that children are getting their information about online etiquette, safety and “risk” from school, not from home (p.24). Following from this information then, **we must reconsider the gap between when children get this information at school and what they have been doing prior to that point, at home around their entertainment practices. Here’s the problem: at home children have little supervision, little support, and little education about online safety and yet this is where they often first encounter independent use of the Internet. Since so many schools prohibit the entertainment sites that children most enjoy and where they acquire their online skills and experience, it is not likely that schools will support children in managing their engagements with these sites. Where can children have supervised experiences that allow them independence with guidance? Where are they able to assert their agency and be assured of a safety net for learning? Why are schools not introducing children to the Internet until Grade 2 or 3? By the time children are given access to the Internet at school, they have already developed practices based in entertainment experiences.**

It is clear to me that policy is often informed by what we would like childhood to be and not what it really is. We continue to recycle myths of childhood instead of engaging children and accepting what they do as legitimate. In the *Byron Review* one of the recommendations is for Education is to ensure that the “teachers and the wider children’s workforce” is skilled up to help children be safe online. This suggests that online safety education might reach beyond the classroom and schooling into the realms of childcare and pre-school activities. This would go a considerable way toward meeting children online in their early years and in their leisure time and spaces. **We need to give children greater supported access to online activities in**

supervised environments like after-school care services, childcare, libraries and schools so that they can learn to be self-managing consumers and media participants within a safe learning environment.

Byron, Tanya (2008) *Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review* (London: Department for Children, Schools & Families)

Click & Connect: Young Australians' Use of Online Social Media (qualitative research report) (2009) Sydney: Australian Communications and Media Authority.

“Cyberthreat: Caution urged as young ‘live their lives’ on net” (*Sunday Mail* 11/3/07; sourced from Factiva) [accessed 14 Jan 2010]

Editorial, “Dangers of baring our lives online,” *Sunday Mail*, 4/3/07; sourced from Factiva [accessed 14 Jan 2010]

Marwick, Alice E., Diego M. Diaz, John Palfrey (2010) “Youth, Privacy and Reputation: Literature Review” (Harvard U: Berkman Center for Internet & Society) <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1588163> [accessed 14 April 2010]

Janis Wolak et al (2008) “Online ‘Predators’ and Their Victims.” *American Psychologist* Feb-March, Vol. 63, No. 2. pp.111-128