

**THE MAKING OF CITIZENS
YOUNG PEOPLE, TELEVISION NEWS
AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICS**

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by
David Buckingham

**Institute of Education, University of London
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL**

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THE MAKING OF CITIZENS: YOUNG PEOPLE, TELEVISION NEWS AND THE LIMITS OF POLITICS

David Buckingham

Institute of Education, University of London

Debates about young people's relationship with politics have often reached pessimistic conclusions. Evidence about declining levels of political knowledge and participation typically lead to a view of young people as merely ignorant, apathetic and cynical. Such assertions are frequently part of a broader lament for the apparent decline of democracy, 'civic virtue' and 'social capital', which has become increasingly prominent in Western societies in recent years (e.g. Hart, 1994; Putnam, 1995).

The place of the mass media in these debates is somewhat double-edged. On the one hand, the media - and 'commercialised' youth culture more broadly - are often seen to be primarily to blame for this perceived decline in political awareness. These arguments are perhaps most familiar on the political Right, although they also form a significant theme in the 'communitarian' rhetoric which currently appears to inspire left-liberal policy-makers both in Britain and in the United States (e.g. Etzioni, 1993). Traditional notions of citizenship are, it is argued, no longer relevant, as viewers zap distractedly between commercial messages and superficial entertainment, substituting vicarious experience for authentic social interaction and community life (e.g. Wexler, 1990).

On the other hand, there is growing concern about young people's declining interest in news media. Particularly in the United States, readership of broadsheet newspapers and ratings for 'flagship' television news broadcasts are in steep decline among this age group; and this is compounded by what some critics see as their growing interest in 'tabloid' news, a genre frequently condemned for its preoccupation with 'sensationalism' and its lack of serious political information (Times Mirror Center, 1990). Likewise, research in the UK suggests that young people's use of, and interest in, news media are minimal. Only 6% of young people's viewing of television comes into this category; while their reading of newspapers focuses largely on entertainment, features and sports pages (Harcourt & Hartland, 1992). Research repeatedly finds that young people express a low level of interest in media coverage of political affairs (Cullingford, 1992; Buckingham, 1996; Walker, 1996). Given the lack of comparative historical data, it is impossible to know whether this is simply an effect of age, or whether it is a 'cohort effect' as in the US, although the latter would seem increasingly likely.

Meanwhile, some critics have attempted to turn this argument around, suggesting that young people are actively excluded from the domain of politics, and from dominant forms of political discourse. From this perspective, young people's apparent lack of interest in politics is merely a rational response to their own powerlessness. Why should they bother to learn about something when they have no power to influence it, and when it makes no effort to address itself to them? Young people are seen here, not as apathetic or irresponsible, but as positively disenfranchised (Bhavnani, 1991).

Likewise, it has been argued that mainstream news journalism has failed to keep pace with the changing cultural competencies of young people. Katz (1993), for

example, suggests that young people have a very different orientation to information from that of older generations, and that they prefer the more 'informal' and 'ironic' style of new media to the 'monotonously reassuring voice' of conventional news journalism. According to this account, it is the failure of the established news media to connect with the forms of 'everyday politics' which are most important for this generation that accounts for their declining audience. Journalists, it would seem, have only themselves to blame.

Against this background, this paper presents a brief summary of some key themes raised in an extensive study of young people's responses to television news. The fieldwork was conducted in schools in Britain and the US, with students aged between eleven and seventeen; and the study also involved an analysis of news programmes produced specifically for this age group. A full account of the research, and a review of previous work in this field, is contained in Buckingham (forthcoming).

(De-) constructing 'politics'

The young people whom I interviewed were, on one level, extremely cynical about politics as conventionally defined - that is, about the actions of politicians. While they were sometimes irreverent or dismissive, they could also be distinctly bitter and forceful. Politicians were often condemned, not merely as boring, but also as corrupt, uncaring, insincere and self-interested; and politics was widely dismissed as a kind of dishonest game, which had little relevance to the students' everyday lives and concerns. The students explained the reasons for these views in terms of their own inability to intervene or participate: since they could not make any difference to what happened, why should they make the effort to find out about it? When pushed, they

acknowledged that political changes (for example, at the election) might well have implications for themselves or their families; and yet the fact that they could not vote meant that they could only observe this process with passive detachment. Somehow, a lack of interest in politics appeared to be perceived as part of the condition of being a child.

In this study, this cynical stance became more prevalent with age, a fact which can be explained in various ways. To some extent, of course, it can be seen a consequence of cognitive development: as they become more able to 'decentre', children begin to hypothesise about (and to analyse critically) the motivations of others. To some degree, this change is also a matter of access to information: in general, the older children here simply knew and understood much more about politics - and hence about issues such as corruption and media manipulation - and were therefore able to provide more concrete evidence in support of their views. However, this increasing cynicism can also be seen as a result of young people's growing awareness of their own powerlessness. Older teenagers are frequently caught between adult injunctions to behave 'responsibly' and adult prohibitions and controls: they are ceaselessly urged to be 'mature' and constantly reminded that they are not. It is not surprising that they are often so keen to challenge what they perceive as inconsistency, complacency or hypocrisy on the part of adults - and not only politicians.

The notion of 'cynical chic', which emerges from similar research with adults (Eliasoph, 1990; Gamson, 1992), captures something of what is taking place here. According to this argument, such expressions of cynicism serve as a valuable - and indeed pleasurable - way of rationalising one's own sense of powerlessness, and even of claiming a degree of superiority and control. Certainly, there is a sense in

which the students' expressions of apathy or disinterest (as distinct perhaps from cynicism) should be seen as superficial. Many students expressed the view that politics as a whole was simply 'boring', and that it was of no interest to them; and yet they were able to engage in some extremely complex and sophisticated debates about key political issues.

Indeed, at several points here, the students were clearly struggling to connect the 'political' dimensions of their own everyday experiences with the official discourse of politics encountered through the media. Their discussions of youth crime, for example, or of environmental issues, demonstrated both a cynicism about those in authority and a genuine attempt to think through the advantages and disadvantages of particular policies, both in the light of the evidence presented and in the light of personal experience. Several students possessed very clear commitments on these issues, and few were prepared to support the introduction of curfews or the despoliation of the natural environment; and yet their discussions were characterised by a careful concern for the validity of the evidence, a willingness to consider the consequences of particular policies, and an attempt to imagine alternative solutions.

In many instances, however, the preoccupations of national politics were dismissed in favour of the more immediate concerns of the local (for example, the local environment, crime in the neighbourhood, family histories, schooling or consumer behaviour). In the process, the potential connections between the two were often lost. This was most apparent in discussions of welfare spending, and to some extent of racial politics. The students were effectively discussing the same issues as the politicians, although they positively refused to recognise this. This was partly symptomatic of the principled rejection identified above; although the extent to which

news might be capable of making politics relevant to lived experience also depended on the formal strategies of the programmes themselves (see Buckingham, 1998).

In order to appreciate what might be taking place here, it is obviously necessary to adopt a broader definition of politics, which is not confined to the actions of politicians or political institutions. As Cullingford (1992) points out, children develop 'political' concepts at a very early stage, through their everyday experiences of institutions such as the school and the family: notions of authority, fairness and justice, rules and laws, power and control, are all formed long before they are required to express their views in the form of voting. The choice available at school lunches, the attempt to introduce compulsory uniforms, or even the organisation of the school playground are, in this respect, just as 'political' as what goes on in parliament. One might well make a similar case about sports or entertainment: the success of Tiger Woods or the Spice Girls can clearly be interpreted as 'political' phenomena, as they implicitly were by some of the students here. However, one should avoid any premature collapse of the distinction between the 'personal' and the 'political'. The personal can become political, but this requires a fundamental shift in how issues are framed or defined. At the most general level, 'political thinking' implies a view of the individual self in collective or social terms. This is not an automatic or guaranteed process, but one which may positively require certain kinds of information to be made available.

The growth of this kind of 'political thinking' can partly be explained in developmental terms, of course. Particularly among some of the middle age group in this study (age 13-14), one can detect the emergence of a broadly consistent and even 'logical' political world-view, which relates partly to other developmental shifts - for instance, the ability to relate parts to wholes (for example, in seeing individuals as

representative of broader social categories), or the ability to view the world from perspectives other than one's own (for example, in hypothesising about why the experiences of members of other generations or cultures might have led them to adopt particular beliefs).

Nevertheless, there were also some clear social differences in terms of the students' orientations both towards politics and towards news. Broadly speaking, the middle-class or upwardly mobile children were more likely to express a positive interest in and/or knowledge about political issues (as conventionally defined); and there was some evidence that this reflected their own perceptions of their potential futures, as powerful figures or at least as 'stakeholders' in society. By contrast, the working-class students, particularly in the US school, appeared to be less well-informed and more comprehensively alienated. Likewise, the domain of politics (as conventionally defined) frequently seemed to be perceived by students of both genders, both implicitly and explicitly, as masculine. Girls were more likely to dwell on the 'human interest' aspects of political issues, and to express generalised alienation from or apathy towards institutionalised political activity. There was some variation here according to issues, however: ecology was implicitly seen - and explicitly claimed - as more of a 'girls' issue', while the machinations of elections and party politics were more enthusiastically addressed by boys.

This definition of a 'political self' is, however, a highly self-conscious process, in which social identities are claimed and negotiated in the course of discussion. In the case of gender, there were several instances here in which girls actively resisted 'masculine' values, and chose to assert the authority of what they perceived as 'feminine' values, most overtly in the case of environmentalism. By contrast, 'race' was a much more problematic dimension of identity, particularly in the context of

ethnically mixed groups; and the explicit 'race politics' of some of the items discussed placed further obstacles in the way of claiming a positive 'Black' identity. As these examples suggest, claiming membership of a collective is not always a straightforward achievement.

In summary, this study confirms the view that young people's alienation from, and cynicism about, politics should be interpreted as a result of exclusion and disenfranchisement, rather than ignorance or immaturity. In attempting to understand the development of political understanding, we need to adopt a broader definition of politics, which recognises the potentially political dimensions of 'personal' life and of everyday experience. In the process, it is important to recognise that 'political thinking' is not merely an intellectual or developmental achievement, but an interpersonal process which is part of the construction of a collective, social identity.

Programme form: pedagogy and address

Four contrasting programmes were used in this study: Nick News and Channel One News from the USA, and First Edition and Wise Up from Britain. Broadly speaking, Channel One News and First Edition are significantly more conventional than Nick News and Wise Up: in several respects, they are much closer to the style and presentational format of mainstream news. Their aim is essentially to make news accessible to a younger audience. This does entail some departures from the conventions of mainstream news, for example in terms of the balance between 'foreground' and 'background', the kind of language used and the style of presentation. To some extent (particularly in the case of Channel One News), this

could be seen as a kind of superficial 'window dressing'; although First Edition also uses young people as interviewers (albeit in a rather limited way), and has begun to experiment with a viewers' access slot. Nevertheless, neither programme significantly challenges what is seen to count as 'news'; and both appear to invite a fundamentally deferential stance on the part of the viewer (cf. Fiske, 1989).

By contrast, Nick News and Wise Up depart more radically from the conventions of the genre. On one level, neither programme should strictly be seen as 'news', in the sense that neither is immediately topical; Nick News is essentially a news magazine programme, while Wise Up is a young people's access show. Nevertheless, this is implicitly to accept a conventional definition of what counts as news in the first place; and indeed to imply that news should be weighted towards 'foreground' rather than 'background'. In fact, both programmes do cover issues which feature in mainstream news, and which are matters of debate within the political domain (that is, which are of concern for politicians). In terms of their pedagogy and their address to the viewer, however, they offer a distinctly different conception of what might count as 'news', and what form it might take. While this has a particular relevance to the younger audience, the more widespread turn away from news media in recent years suggests that it might also have implications for the audience at large.

Among the students interviewed here, there was very little doubt about the approach they preferred. For the US students, Nick News was almost universally perceived to be more interesting and effective than Channel One News. In this respect, the issue of the programmes' address to the younger audience was a particular focus of concern. The older students here perceived both programmes to be aimed at a younger audience, although Channel One News was particularly singled out for criticism on the grounds that it was patronising. The programme was repeatedly

accused of trying (and failing) to be 'cool' or 'hip'. By contrast, Nick News was congratulated for not 'talking down' to its audience; and some explicitly praised it for taking a 'mature' approach. There was also praise for the fact that it presented new information 'about things that you probably don't already know about', rather than just presenting a simplified version of the mainstream news, as was seen to be the case with Channel One News. Nick News was also judged to be more 'kid centred', in that it included more young people, rather than simply 'the person sitting at the desk'. It was praised for its inclusion of 'ordinary' people, rather than the 'stuck-up' people who are normally 'all over the news'. According to one thirteen-year-old girl, 'Channel One News tells you about the President and his home and his wife and the election and stuff, but this [Nick News] tells you about real life, the one you have to worry about.'

Responses to the British programmes were even more unanimous. Wise Up was universally preferred to First Edition, both on the grounds of its style and its address to young people. There was considerable praise for its graphics, camerawork and editing, which were variously described as 'rough', 'cool', 'catchy', 'effective' and 'attention-grabbing'. By contrast, First Edition was described as 'just like boring news', and condemned for its 'stupid newsreaders... sitting at a desk'. Its approach was seen as much more 'formal'; and the young people included on the programme were perceived to be 'stiff' and 'uncomfortable'. Here again, the issue of the programmes' address to the younger audience was a particular focus of concern. There was some scepticism about Wise Up's implicit claim to be providing unmediated access for children's voices: several students suspected that the programme had been 'made to look' as though it had been produced by children, when in fact it had not. Nevertheless, as with Nick News, there was considerable praise for its attempt to present 'kids' point of view', and (more broadly) for its focus

on 'ordinary people'. By contrast, First Edition was seen by many to be 'too adult' and 'not really anything to do with children'. It was pointed out that the dominant voices in the items were those of adults, and that the young interviewers were not allowed to put across their own points of view. Like Channel One News, First Edition was condemned for its emphasis on 'politics', rather than on 'things that matter to kids'.

On one level, these conclusions appear to confirm commonsense wisdom among television producers who work for this age group. Being patronising and being boring are obviously to be avoided; although this is easier said than done. Young people are very sensitive to age differences, and are particularly scathing about programmes that appear to underestimate or 'talk down' to them. They also want programmes that are relevant to their own everyday concerns, which are largely marginalised in mainstream news. Yet while they condemned the more conventional approach of Channel One News and First Edition, these students did not simply want to be entertained. On the contrary, they also wanted to be informed and made to think; and the more adventurous approaches of Nick News and Wise Up were praised insofar as they achieved this.

This study clearly confirms the need for innovation if news is to re-awaken the interest of younger audiences - and indeed of the large majority of viewers. This is partly a matter of developing new formal strategies, but it also implies a much more fundamental rethinking of what is seen to count as news in the first place. The deferential stance which is invited and encouraged by mainstream news formats needs to be abandoned in favour of an approach which invites scepticism and active engagement. Much greater efforts need to be made, not merely to explain the causes and the context of news events, but also to enable viewers to perceive their

relevance to their own everyday lives. News can no longer afford to confine itself to the words and actions of the powerful, or to the narrow and exclusive discourses which currently dominate the public sphere of social and political debate.

The avoidance of 'entertainment' in favour of a narrow insistence on seriousness and formality which characterises dominant forms of news production systematically alienates and excludes substantial sectors of the audience. And yet, as I have implied, the answer is not simply to add sugar to the pill. News clearly does have a great deal to learn from the genres which are most successful in engaging the younger audience. Obviously, such approaches can be a recipe for superficiality, but they can also offer new ways for news to fulfil its traditional mission to educate and to inform - a mission which it is performing far from adequately at the present time.

Critical viewers?

Generally speaking, these students knew a great deal about how news programmes were put together; they were alert to the potential for misleading information, inadequate evidence and 'bias'; and they were often very prepared to argue with what they had seen, both in terms of its own consistency and logic, and by drawing on contrary evidence of their own. Their debates about these issues focused not only on the selection of information, but also on its presentation: they repeatedly drew attention to aspects of editing, camerawork and visual design which they felt were designed to persuade them to accept a particular reading of the issues. Of course, this is not to say that these young people are therefore immune to media influence: there are systematic omissions and dominant frames in media discourse which inevitably exert constraints on how particular issues can be interpreted.

Nevertheless, as Gamson (1992) argues, readers and viewers negotiate meaning in complicated ways that vary from issue to issue; and they draw on other resources, including their general knowledge of television as a medium, in doing so.

As in the students' discussions of politics, there was a clear developmental dimension here, which is partly about access to information, and partly a function of broader cognitive achievements. Unsurprisingly, the older students here knew much more about television as a medium, both in terms of the 'language' and characteristic techniques of television texts and in terms of the operations of the industry. They were also more inclined to 'decentre' (for example, to perceive that a particular message might have persuasive intentions) and to apply criteria to do with logical consistency (for example, to point out the contradictions between verbal commentary and visual evidence).

Nevertheless, there are significant methodological difficulties in identifying and evaluating evidence of 'critical viewing'. As I have found, both here and in previous work (e.g. Buckingham, 1993), critical discourses about the media may emerge as a function of the interview context - as a response to what subjects believe the interviewer wants to hear. From this perspective, critical discourse may be little more than a socially desirable response - a way of distancing oneself from the 'uncritical viewer' who is implicitly invoked, and condemned, in so much academic and public debate about the media.

Furthermore, the fact that viewers are capable of being 'critical' - or, more accurately, of mobilising critical discourses - does not necessarily mean that they are not influenced. In fact, there were some clear indications in several cases here of at least short-term influence. In some instances, visual evidence appeared to carry a

particular persuasive force, whether or not this might have been the intention of the producers. In others, the provision of new information appeared to change some students' attitudes to the topic. Even here, however, the students were often self-reflexively aware of this process: they drew attention to the influence of visual 'evidence' even as they accepted its validity; and while they did not challenge the accuracy of new information, they often suspected that other information, which might undermine the argument, was not being provided.

The perception of 'bias', which is obviously a key dimension of critical viewing, is thus a highly complex phenomenon. It might be logical to expect that viewers who already know more about a particular issue (for example, those who have direct personal experience of it) will be more likely to detect bias than those who know less. Likewise, one would expect viewers who feel strongly about a given topic to be more likely to perceive bias in an item which presents an opposing view to their own. In fact, the situation in these interviews was rather more ambiguous: while there were certainly instances which conformed to this pattern, a significant majority did not. The students' level of emotional 'investment' in the issues often proved more significant in this respect than their capacities as rational critics.

At the same time, analysing perceptions of media bias raises significant epistemological issues. Is bias something inherent in the text, or is it a function of the relationship between text and reader? And how are such judgments to be evaluated? On the one hand, there were instances in these discussions where students had clearly misinterpreted what they had seen, or just failed to understand it - and in some cases, they themselves directly acknowledged this, or accepted it when it was pointed out to them. Some of these misinterpretations can be traced more or less directly to particular properties of the text: its confusing use of

metaphor, its failure to provide sufficient background information or explanation, or the contradictions between verbal and visual evidence. Yet others were clearly a result of inattention, or the fact that students had mistakenly emphasised (or been distracted by) comparatively marginal elements of the text, or reached false conclusions from them.

On the other hand, there were significant mis-matches between the way in which I read particular items (in my privileged capacity as the academic analyst) and the way in which the students did so, which cannot be put down simply to misinterpretation. These divergent responses can partly be explained in terms of the different knowledge and competencies which readers bring to the text; and in this respect, at least some of the differences result from the fact that as a white, male adult - and, in the case of the US study, as British rather than American - I was bound to apply or invoke different frames in making sense of the material from those of the students.

These differences point to the limitations of objectivism; although equally, they cannot simply be side-stepped by an appeal to relativism. Empirically, texts do not mean anything that readers want them to mean; and all readings are not equally valid. However unfashionable it may be, 'bias' is a key conceptual category in viewers' everyday responses to television news, and to other texts that purport to be factual. Yet we cannot begin to evaluate such judgments without some notion of accuracy - that is, without some way of appealing to a set of facts about the text against which particular responses can be compared and assessed.

To sum up, this research suggests that young people develop a set of critical competencies - a form of 'media literacy' - which they are able to apply to their

readings even of relatively unfamiliar texts or genres. In the case of news and factual programming, judgments about 'bias' are a central concern; although they are not simply a matter of 'detecting' something which is or is not immanent in the text. In practice, the emotional, personal or social identifications which viewers have invested in a particular political issue may be more important in determining how they interpret texts than any purely cognitive or rationalistic process of critical judgment. To this extent, there may be limitations in any model of critical viewing which is based merely on a cynical rejection of the medium - or indeed on the dispassionate pursuit of information.

Conclusion

The apparent 'crisis' in young people's relationship with politics and with news journalism raises fundamental questions about the future of citizenship in late modernity. In this paper, I have argued that more popular, relevant forms of news journalism will be necessary if it is to continue to fulfil its fundamental democratic functions. Yet changes in this arena will need to be accompanied by broader - and in some respects much more traditional - forms of educational and political strategy. The new forms of cultural expression and political participation envisaged by some advocates of the new digital age will not simply arise of their own accord, or as a guaranteed consequence of technological change: there is a need to devise imaginative forms of cultural policy which will foster and support them. Against the surfeit of postmodern enthusiasm, we need to insist on relatively traditional questions about who has the right to speak, whose voices are heard and who has control over the means of production. As Gilbert (1992) argues, the political and the cultural are not synonymous; and if rights of access to cultural expression are to be realised, more traditional forms of civil and political rights must also inevitably be at stake - not least for young people themselves.

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