

Too sexy too soon? Media and the sexualisation of childhood

Seminar hosted by the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media in the London Knowledge Lab

November 6, 2008

Alexandra Cochrane

When Australian artist Bill Henson held an art gallery viewing of his photos of nude 13-year-olds, controversy raged across Australia like wildfire. A seminar was held by visiting academic Kath Albury in the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media in London to examine the representation and sexualisation of children in the media.

Images of children – particularly of naked or scantily clad children – are hugely controversial in today's society concerned with paedophilia. The moodily lit photographs of children in Henson's art gallery provoked an outcry in Australia in 2008, prompting Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to say they were "revolting". Police arrived at the New South Wales gallery to box up and remove the pictures. The debate over what exactly is art and what is pornography became a topic of national conversation.

Such was the strength of public reaction that a classification board was set up. This committee gave the display a PG-rating, and deemed it to not be child pornography. Albury said that the fears surrounding the sexualisation of children fed into a moral panic on the representation of youngsters that was going on in Australia at the time.

Concerns over billboards advertising drugs for impotence, the provocative outfits worn by the popular Bratz dolls and the revealing girls' Mark-Kate and Ashley clothing range (designed by former child television stars, the Olsen twins) prompted a report into the representation on children in 2006. A committee from the Australian Institute put together the Corporate Paedophilia Report – itself a loaded phrase as Albury pointed out – which examined the "sexual seduction of children". The report referred to everything from content from a department store magazine (which later successfully sued for defamation) to websites to billboards. It found that exposure to certain kinds of material led to increased risk of eating disorders and an over-emphasis on body image. It called for more classification on advertising and publically available content to "let children be children".

In March 2008, the issue of what it is appropriate to expose children to reappeared as Love Kylie underwear was advertised on the official Kylie Minogue website, a site predominantly accessed by young fans. A Senate enquiry was set up in response to the parents' lobby group 'Kids Free to be Kids'. It received 167 submissions, indicating that the representation of children and 'raunch culture' was still a "hot topic", according to Albury. The senate examined everything from a pop music video by singer Rhianna to girls' underwear with the Playboy bunny logo.

The Senate relied heavily on a report by the American Psychological Taskforce on the sexualisation of children. However, this document failed to set out the definitions of sexualisation and conducted research on college age girls, not children. This was "a very important point to have missed". Albury pointed out that the debate was framed

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in entirely negative terms: content was to be banned or censored, rather than suggestions of what might be a positive representation of children. No guidelines were issued on how to help parents address issues of self-image and sexual development in an age-appropriate manner. “It was an out of sight, out of mind idea,” argued Albury.

She concluded by informing the audience that media organizations have thirteen months (at the time of writing) to explain how they will address the report’s concerns. However, in a country with strict guidelines on the representation of children, Albury argues that it is surely the task of schools to put in place programmes to teach children about self image and sexual development, rather than simply ban material, in order to protect children and childhood.

Kath Albury is a post-doctoral fellow at the Journalism and Media Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

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