



Sonia Livingstone

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## Childhood, Parenting, & Industry Responsibilities – Response to Bailey Review

0 comments

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“For children to be children, parents need to be parents” – Bailey Review

Parents, it seems, are worried about their children. The government is worried about parental worries. And industry is worried about what the government will do. The fast-paced, fascinating and yet scarily complex digital world in which children are now thoroughly embedded only exacerbates such worries, turning up the heat on demands for action that can be heard from across the political spectrum.

Bravely entering the hotly contested territory of childhood ills in a heavily commercialised digital culture, a territory in which blaming parents is a popular media pastime and bemoaning the loss of childhood innocence an easy way to curry favour with politicians, Reg Bailey published his report on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2011, having been commissioned to do this by the Secretary of State for Education just six months earlier.

*Letting Children be Children* offers an independent examination of the much-hyped claims regarding the commercialization, sexualisation and even digitalization of

childhood. It builds on earlier reports (commissioned by the previous government) by [David Buckingham](#), [Linda Papadopoulus](#) and [Tanya Byron](#). The report was warmly welcomed by the Prime Minister in a [letter sent to Reg Bailey](#), including a promise to 'should take stock of progress in 18 months time.'

Creditably, the report prioritises the views of parents and children through new research conducted with them. Although hardly a controversial move, this corrects the astonishingly common marginalization of their views when policy debates get technical or political, or when the interests at stake represent major financial investments. This does not mean that parents are always right. Like any other group, they are highly diverse, and not always conscientious or rigorous in putting their principles into practice. And, like other groups, including politicians, they can be swayed by media panics.

Though I appreciate the desire to counter the commonplace devaluing of parental views, I cannot exactly agree that 'parents are the experts in deciding whether something is appropriate for their child'. But they are one vital source of expertise, and Bailey is right to observe that they struggle to act on their knowledge of their child given that they are under siege from the world of commerce, advertising and the relentless targeting of the profitable child 'market'.

As Tanya Byron said at the summit of the [UK Council for Child Internet Safety](#), if a company provides services to children, it should be accountable to the standards of children's services, which, at least in the public sector, generally take as their starting point the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This throws an interesting light on the role and responsibilities of the many providers of products and services used by children – in terms of both what they could and should do, and the processes of independent review and evaluation by which the public can know whether and how well they do it.

There's plenty to be debated in the recommendations of the Bailey Review, since it calls for more and diverse forms of regulation to protect the development of children (defined, interestingly, as those under 16 years) from 'an increasingly sexual and sexualized culture.' Let me just focus on one point – the importance of [media literacy](#), a policy concern already examined in this project. To help them combat the commercialized and sexualized "wallpaper" of children's lives, so they can play their part in addition to the curbs proposed for industry, Bailey calls for:

“Quality assurance for media and commercial literacy resources and education for children ... to help children develop their emotional resilience to the commercial and sexual pressures that today’s world places on them. Providers should commission independent evaluation of their provision, not solely measuring take-up but, crucially, to assess its effectiveness. Those bodies with responsibilities for promoting media literacy, including Ofcom and the BBC, should encourage the development of minimum standards guidance for the content of media and commercial literacy education and resources to children.”

On the one hand, I completely agree – rigorous evaluation of media literacy initiatives has been sadly lacking, though promising in its results when undertaken; setting minimum standards is a good way to avoid box-ticking or narrow, non-scalable or quickly dated provision. Bodies such as Ofcom and the BBC need all the encouragement they can get given the apparent cutting of any substantial initiatives beyond tracking the public’s media literacy levels or the provision of resources that the public must go out of its way to find.

Most important, I agree with Bailey’s view that media literacy, though vital, can only take us so far. I have argued elsewhere that even a literate public can’t make sense of illegible interfaces, privacy policies or terms and conditions. Here, for sure, is a crucial role for industry and regulators.

On the other hand, I disagree – for once again, media literacy is positioned as a defensive strategy to keep out the ‘bad’ media stuff, thereby, also risking curtailing children’s opportunities to engage creatively with media and, through media, with their wider world. More **ambitious conceptions of media literacy** that enable digital participation rather than (or as well as) protection and safety are vital to cultural expression, civic engagement and social connectivity. Now we need a government report also to trumpet the importance of these if we are ever to have a truly literate public capable of managing the digital age.

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## About the author



### Sonia Livingstone

Sonia Livingstone OBE is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextual approach, her research examines how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action. She has published twenty books on media audiences, media literacy and media regulation, with a particular focus on the opportunities and risks of digital media use in the everyday lives of children and young people. Her most recent book is *The class: living and learning in the digital age* (2016, with Julian Sefton-Green). Sonia has advised the UK government, European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Europe and other national and international organisations on children's rights, risks and safety in the digital age. She was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2014 'for services to children and child internet safety.'

Sonia Livingstone is a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, the British Psychological Society, the Royal Society for the Arts and fellow and past President of the International Communication Association (ICA). She has been visiting professor at the Universities of Bergen, Copenhagen, Harvard, Illinois, Milan, Oslo, Paris II, Pennsylvania, and Stockholm, and is on the editorial board of several leading journals. She is on the Executive Board of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, is a member of the Internet Watch Foundation's Ethics Committee, is an Expert Advisor to the Council of Europe, and was recently Special Advisor to the House of Lords' Select Committee on Communications, among other roles. Sonia has received many awards and honours, including honorary doctorates from the University of Montreal, Université Panthéon Assas, the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, the University of the Basque Country, and the University of Copenhagen. She is currently leading the project Global Kids Online (with UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti and EU Kids Online), researching children's understanding of digital privacy (funded by the Information Commissioner's Office) and writing a book with Alicia Blum-Ross called 'Parenting for a Digital Future (Oxford University Press), among other research, impact and writing projects. Sonia is chairing LSE's Truth, Trust and Technology Commission in 2017-2018, and participates in the European Commission-funded research networks, DigiLitEY and MakeEY. She runs a blog called [www.parenting.digital](http://www.parenting.digital) and contributes to the LSE's Media Policy Project blog. Follow her on Twitter @Livingstone\_S