

TELEVIZION

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Telling tales about "Teletubbies":

Hype, Hysteria and Hearsay in Press coverage of a popular cultural phenomenon

I blame you lot. The papers." Employee in Stratford-upon-Avon Tourist Information Office, commenting on the success of "Tubbytourism"¹.

"So all that controversy was designed to sell eight-inch Cuddly Tubs?" Unidentified journalist writing in *The Guardian*.²

When I first told friends and colleagues that I was writing an article about the popular children's television programme "Teletubbies", this news provoked a broad spectrum of reactions, including bewildered stares, looks of utter disbelief and even gales of laughter, invariably followed by the same question: "Why?" My usual rejoinder – "And why not?" – tended for the most part to short-circuit any subsequent discussion of the topic. However, to those who were sufficiently intrigued to probe further, I offered a fuller response, namely that I believe, like the journalist, Paul McCann, that for a number of reasons, "Teletubbies" is "now much more than 'only' a children's television programme,³" and furthermore, that like all popular cultural phenomena, it should be, to paraphrase the words of John Fiske, taken to pieces rather than taken for granted. In this article, I will examine some of the initial Press coverage of the "Teletubbies" series which appeared in three broadsheets, namely *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Observer*, and briefly discuss how this media discourse about the programme was used by certain "interest groups" as a catalyst to provoke wide-ranging and long-lasting debates about a number of issues causing them concern. In the process, I will also establish to what extent the much discussed "controversy" surrounding "Teletubbies" might be considered to be, in fact, a media creation, fabricated from hype, hysteria and hearsay.

Let us commence, however, with a very brief history of the "Teletubbies" phenomenon which began on Monday March 31 1997, when a new children's television programme made by Ragdoll Productions was broadcast for the first time on BBC2. "Teletubbies" initially passed largely unremarked by the Great British public, as one might expect given that it was a series aimed at a pre-school audience, shown in an early-morning viewing slot. This situation began to change when the BBC's own television listings magazine, *Radio Times*, published several letters complaining about the station's decision to replace "Playdays", a more "traditional-style" children's programme, by "Teletubbies". As an indication of the kind of passions which

were aroused by this action, one concerned viewer later accused the BBC of committing "cultural vandalism" by axing the programme, on the grounds that "Playdays" had been "a defining experience in the development of a whole generation,"⁴ a description which would now ironically be more likely to be used in relation to "Teletubbies". Crucially, several journalists then seized on these comments from a relatively small but vociferous group of dissatisfied parents, grandparents and child-carers and used them to trigger off what was destined to be a virtual avalanche of media interest. The rest, as they say, is history... By August of the same year, "Teletubbies" had become "the programme all England talks about".⁵ In September, of course, another news story - the aftermath of Princess Diana's death - was temporarily to occupy the copywriters, although bizarrely "Teletubbies" even managed to become linked to that momentous event, since as one journalist noted: "For parents at least, the tragedy will always poignantly be marked by the indignant youthful question: "Why aren't "Teletubbies" on?"⁶ By October, the programme was once again "the nation's obsession", had "reached cult status"⁷ and was attracting some two million viewers.⁸ One month later, the appearance of the first tranche of merchandising inspired by the series led to an outbreak of "toy rage" and adults were offering exorbitant sums of money in order to secure one of the rationed Tellytubby soft toys as a Christmas gift for their precious offspring.⁹

Or, at least this was one version of events, as reported in this case by the journalists of *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, but let us examine these claims a little more carefully. It is easy to dismiss the first statement as a classic line from the so-called "silly season" reporting of the summer months with its focus on frivolous events and activities, and to see the second as a typical example of the kind of hyperbole routinely found in the Press, although neither of these publications are normally noted for their trivial or sensationalist reporting. However, if both remarks are phrased slightly differently along the lines of "the programme all England's *media* talks about" or "the *media's* obsession", then we have perhaps a somewhat more accurate reflection of the state of affairs. As Hannah Pool noted in an article which appeared in August 1997: "Barely a day goes by without the media, including the serious broadsheets, running a "Teletubbies" related story, even semiotic analysis..."¹⁰ Indeed, reviewing the pages of *The Observer*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* for the last few months of 1997, one is left with the impression that it was considered almost *de rigueur* for journalists to prove that they were in the know by including some reference to the programme, however tenuous the link might be to the subject they were writing about, from reviews of contemporary art exhibitions¹¹ to items about England's cricket team.¹² In fact, just about everyone gets their chance to voice their opinions about "Teletubbies" except, it should be said, the pre-school children making up the audience for whom the programme was originally intended, and in the text sample I analysed, only one journalist, Maggie Brown, bothered to record in print the reactions of her own children and their friends to the screening of an episode which she arranged.¹³ Elsewhere it is only adult responses to the programme which are considered to be newsworthy.

If we disregard those articles which contain only passing references to "Teletubbies", and concentrate instead on those stories which appear to focus mainly on the programme itself, it becomes clear that although the series was fairly consistently featured in the Press in the period July-December 1997, it was framed in a number of different contexts, taking on a quite distinctive significance in each.

When reading early accounts of parents' reactions to "Teletubbies", one is struck by the militaristic overtones of the language used to describe their actions: the programme "provoked a barrage of complaints"¹⁴ and parents "bombarded the letters pages"¹⁵ with criticism which is described as "flak"¹⁶ whilst the remark that "letter and phone calls have

been pouring into the BBC,"¹⁷ evokes a sense of invasion. Parents' response to the repetition in the programme is couched in equally warlike terms: "Adults go berserk." Berserk,¹⁸ a word which has its origins in the Icelandic term used to refer to the Norse warriors who worked themselves up into a wild frenzy before engaging in battle. And the journalist Judith Williamson is in no doubt about the fact that this is war when she notes that by carrying coverage of "Teletubbies", the *Face* magazine was planning on "enter[ing] the fray".¹⁹ The BBC, moreover, are cast in the role of opponents, accused of using "Teletubbies", which "exploded into the nation's consciousness,"²⁰ as their key weapon. The launch of the merchandising designed to tie in with the series was "timed with military precision" and a marketing "triumph" was predicted, followed by "world domination" when the programme was eventually sold overseas. Such discourse may appear somewhat out of place in discussions about a children's television series until we realise that what we see here are the textual traces of an on-going ideological struggle relating to educational standards in the UK, a war between the "trendies" and the "traditionalists": "Teletubbies" managed to get caught in the crossfire of yet another pitched battle.²¹ This becomes clear in an article about Stephen Byers, the then Minister of State for School Standards, who is described as "fighting back" against the "dumbing down" of British culture exemplified by the "Teletubbies". Significantly in this context, the journalist notes: "Mr. Byers said he had asked for a recording of the "Teletubbies", but had not yet had an opportunity to view it,"²² highlighting the fact that it was what the programme symbolised that was really the issue. It is interesting, too, with regard to the "dumbing-down" dimension of the "Teletubbies" debate that the vast majority of the complaints reported about the series should have been focused on the inarticulacy of the characters, as if their inability to speak, their "dumbness," made them the literal embodiment of this phenomenon and thus a particularly apt target for criticism. When Anna Home, head of BBC children's television, finally announced at the Edinburgh International Television Festival that the programme was going to include more "traditional language", predictably it was reported that those groups who had been critical of "Teletubbies" would see the decision as "a victory". Her own parting shot however was both witty and well-observed: "The children who grew up watching *"Clangers"* (a television series for pre-school children featuring a group of extraterrestrial whistling mice) didn't grow up into a generation of whistlers".²³

Military metaphors made a re-appearance in another "Teletubbies"-related story, in which the discussion centred on the topical theme of the Internet and the thorny issue of freedom of expression. In this case, the BBC were firmly cast in the role of dictatorial aggressor by the columnist, Francis Wheen, who refers to the "fusillade of electronic grapeshot"²⁴ which the organisation's lawyers sent out to those running websites devoted to "Teletubbies", threatening legal action in connection with alleged breaches of copyright and intellectual property law. In addition, he relates how website editors advancing what were judged to be unorthodox opinions about the meaning of "Teletubbies" were cautioned about the dangers of "compromising the programme's intentions". Wheen's sympathies are apparent in his labelling of the BBC's action as "bullying" and in his reporting of the fate of the recipients of the organisation's emailing, all of whom "capitulated at once... so (their) small but thriving corner of cyberspace... is now a sad sepulchre of nervous disclaimers and blank pages".

Although Wheen also uses the programme essentially as a pretext, as a means, in this case, of putting a new spin on the perennial debate surrounding what he calls the "quaint old concept of free speech", unlike Stephen Byers, this journalist does at least give the impression of having seen an episode of "Teletubbies", since in an earlier column he had written a satirical piece drawing humorous comparisons between a number of Conservative politicians and the characters in the series.²⁵ However, after completing a review of the Press coverage of the programme in its first few months of existence, I began to wonder just how many of those other journalists writing about "Teletubbies" had, in fact, seen the programme

for themselves and how many were merely recycling the opinions of others. The following example, which involves literal quotation, provides an interesting illustration of how this borrowing was taking place and also how these displaced quotations may gain new significance in the process. Let us begin at one end, so to speak, of the intertextual chain with an extract from a humorous item about Stephen Byers:

"*Everyone knows the Teletubbies are 'slow, banal and ill-conceived', not to say repetitive*". ("Passnotes: Stephen Byers", *The Guardian*, 30 July 1997)

The journalist has placed one phrase inside quotation marks, obviously suggesting that these are someone else's words taken from another context. But whose words? Is this a statement from Byers or a reference back to "Everyone knows" implying that a widely-held belief is being voiced? Is the ambiguity surrounding the status of the words deliberate in this case because the journalist wants readers to believe this is a quotation from the Minister himself? In this isolated instance, it is not possible to tell.

However, let us now take one step back down the intertextual trail and examine another sentence from a previously published article:

"More revealing is *the widespread complaint* that the Teletubbies are '*slow, silly, banal and incoherent*', that they are '*repetitive*' and '*don't talk properly*'. (Judith Williamson, "Babyvision" *The Guardian*, 5 July 1997, p. 8)

Here we have a similar formula of words in almost the same order and once again the use of quotation marks for purposes which are not completely clear, although in this article, since there does not seem to be any particular source which Williamson might be citing, we presume that she is using the punctuation to imply that this kind of thing is said so often, it has become a cliché, something regularly overheard in everyday conversation. But take just final step back and we encounter a familiar-sounding phrase:

"*Parents are angry that the Teletubbies don't talk properly; they say they are slow, silly, banal and incoherent, and that the programme is aimed at children who are really too young to be watching TV at all*" (Maggie Brown, "Parents: A spot of tubby trouble", *The Guardian*, 21 May 1997, p. 14)

Williamson, then, had in fact lifted some phrases directly from Brown's article although what she is quoting in reality is merely yet more reported speech or hearsay. These three brief extracts serve to demonstrate how an unsubstantiated claim about the opinions of an indeterminate number of people (Where did Brown get her information from? Who exactly were these angry parents? How many of them were there?) might later feasibly be interpreted as an authoritative statement which had been delivered directly from the lips of a Government Minister.

Further analysis of the Press coverage about "Teletubbies" reveals the complexity of this use of quotation, for it becomes more and more apparent that in reality the discussion which is taking place in the pages of these newspapers is not directly related to the programme as such. For, what might initially have seemed to be the reporting of a public debate about "Teletubbies" becomes increasingly distanced from this function. It turns instead into something resembling a private conversation between journalists and other so-called media experts who weave an intricate intertextual web which having taken its original inspiration from the programme slowly but surely becomes a self-sustaining, free floating entity. The authors of this elaborate creation draw upon all manner of mediated texts. We find references

to readings of the programme which have appeared in other media texts, both mainstream and marginal. Thus Tim Footman notes that "*NME* and *Melody Maker*... discuss the Orwellian overtones of the big scary telephone thing."²⁶ while Francis Wheen mentions an interview with the Reverend Alan Garrow published in the *Church of England Newspaper* in which the clergyman talked of the religious symbolism present in Teletubbies".²⁷ As we have seen in an earlier example, quotations from other journalists are sometimes slipped unobtrusively into the text; on other occasions, the source consulted is clearly acknowledged, perhaps so that readers will be impressed by such credentials, a device used by Footman in an item about student responses to the series when he notes that the opinion recorded is that of: "Karen Levell, editor of the magazine *Cult TV*"²⁸ The "toy rage" episode mentioned at the start of this article is an excellent example of just how complex this intertextual relationship can become. A review article published in *The Guardian* focused on a current affairs television programme, "Here And Now", shown on 17 November 1997 on BBC1, which had examined the "toy rage" phenomenon. The programme itself had been prompted to cover the story because of a number of accounts in the newspapers of incidents of "toy rage" reportedly caused by a shortage of stocks of "Teletubbies" merchandise, a problem which had first been brought to public attention by the Press. In an attempt to investigate the lengths that adults would be willing to go to in order to ensure that they procured one of the coveted soft toys, the programme-makers had placed an advertisement in *The Times* offering a Teletubby doll for sale and had, they claimed, received offers of up to £ 300. (The recommended retail price at that time for the product was £ 9.99). Following the programme, a number of similar stories featured in the media about greedy sellers and eager buyers, desperate to acquire this precious commodity, and at least some of these accounts made reference to the fact that this Teletubby craze bore a striking resemblance to the reports in the media of "toy rage" incidents which had followed the release of another spin-off toy, Buzz Lightyear, based on a character from the Hollywood film "Toy Story". This example serves to illustrate the interconnectedness between these media texts but also suggests how far the intertextual chain has stretched from a children's television programme to *The Guardian* review item via "Teletubbies"-inspired merchandising, from marketing hype to media-generated hysteria ultimately based on hearsay and rumour.

The media claims made for the cult status of "Teletubbies" amongst the UK student population bear some of the same hallmarks of hype, hysteria and hearsay. Certainly there was interest in the series among the student body, which led to a number of UK-based students editing Internet sites dedicated to the programme, ranging from whimsical discussions of the characters to much more fully elaborated readings of the series.²⁹ However, comments that, for example, the programme was "now slavishly followed by a generation of stoned students"³⁰ or that "late night soul-searching in halls of residence now revolves around the drug symbolism of Tubbytoast and whether that baby in the sun is, like, y'know, God or something".³¹ can be dismissed as journalistic hype. And once again, when the Press coverage is examined more carefully, there is evidence that the media itself has played an important role in the creation and maintenance of this particular "Teletubbies" myth. Journalists are engaged in textual recycling and their information and knowledge comes not from interviewing students or visiting their websites but consulting other media sources. Thus Kellaway reports that "According to *Private Eye*... the programme is a favourite with students because it looks like a psychedelic hallucination"³² but does not bother to problematise this information, despite the fact that the original context for this might have been one of the satirical articles for which the magazine is noted. Wheen refers to "the consensus among Tubby scholars that the show is a druggy fantasy",³³ but who are these "Tubby scholars" that he refers to? Possibly he has similar listening habits to a fellow journalist, Leith who told his readers: "Someone said on the radio that "Teletubbies" has in some way been influenced by the culture of raves and Ecstasy; it is, for instance, set in a

field, the characters have permanently fixed grins, dance around a lot, and talk baby-talk."³⁴ Or maybe When had decided to elevate Leith's personal recollection of an item heard on the radio and then reported in a television review column to the status of undisputed fact. Whilst it is not possible to prove conclusively whether or not the programme enjoyed great popularity amongst students and if it was subjected to intense discussion, perhaps there is evidence of the fact that at least one academic appeared to have been avidly watching "Teletubbies". A session entitled "Why are kids shows hijacked by youth culture?" forming part of the fringe activities at the Edinburgh International Television Festival which was held on August 24 1997 was devoted to discussing how children's programmes have been adopted as cults by students and adults. One of the panellists, Andy Medhurst, a media studies lecturer at Sussex University, was reported to have said "Tinky Winky is the first queer role model for toddlers."³⁵ So was this a new and controversial alternative reading of "Teletubbies"? Possibly... or maybe Medhurst had already read *The Guardian* column which revealed that "Tinky Winky... has been declared a gay icon".³⁶ Whatever the truth of the matter, there was already evidence that another "Teletubbies" tale had only just begun.

In mid- March 1999, the BBC was in the mood for celebrating. It announced that it had just commissioned 105 more episodes of "Teletubbies" and had succeeded in selling the programme to some 59 broadcasters around the globe. Later in the year, the organisation's annual report confirmed that "Teletubbies" were their most lucrative assets, having made the Corporation some 32 million pounds in programme sales and merchandising. When John Morris, the head of sales for BBC Worldwide, the organisation's commercial arm, had been questioned two years previously about the moneyspinning opportunities offered by the "Teletubbies" programme, his reply was brief but proved far-sighted: "The potential on this one is limitless."³⁷ Those same words can also be used to neatly summarise the yarnspinning opportunities which the children's series appears to have afforded the media, with its apparently infinite capacity for telling tales about "Teletubbies" . Tinky Winky, Laa Laa, Dipsy and Po and all their friends in the media say: "Again, again...".

NOTES:

¹'Despite the Teletubby onslaught, the bard still reigns in Stratford', *The Independent* , 13 October 1997, p. 7

²'Pass Notes: Anne Wood', *The Guardian*, 28 August 1997, p. 3

³Paul McCann, 'To Teletubby or not to Teletubby', *The Independent*, 13 October 1997, pp. 6-7

⁴Henry Wickens, 'Say it again', *The Guardian*, 26 August 1997, p. 12

⁵'The Week That Was', *The Guardian*, 30 August 1997, p. 2

⁶Mark Lawson, 'Sky and CNN were first, but a royal death is a BBC matter', *The Guardian*, 31 August 1997, n. p. By a strange quirk of fate, some copies of the BBC video Here come the "Teletubbies" sold in Glasgow were found to contain footage of Diana's funeral. "'Teletubbies" video alert' *The Guardian*, 22 November 1997, p. 7,

⁷David Ward, 'Animal Shelf is shelved despite winning twice the audience of "Teletubbies"', *The Guardian*, 13 October 1997, p. 5

⁸Paul McCann, "'Teletubbies" to get grown-up help with their baby talk', *The Independent*, 25 August 1997, p. 3

⁹Desmond Christy, 'Drop the Dead Cow', *The Guardian*, 18 November 1997, p. 19

¹⁰Hannah Pool, 'Jackdaw: Tubby Trouble' *The Guardian*, 14 August 1997, p. 14

¹¹William Feaver, 'Moore's scores' *The Observer* , 9 November 1997, p. 11

¹²David Hopps, "'Teletubbies" role beckons Atherton' *The Guardian*, 29 July 1997, p. 21

- ¹³Maggie Brown, 'Parents: A sopt of tubby trouble', The Guardian , 21 May 1997, p. 14
- ¹⁴McCann, 25 August 1997
- ¹⁵Judith Williamson, 'Babyvision', The Guardian, 5 July 1997, p. 8
- ¹⁶Brown, 21 May 1997
- ¹⁷Kate Kellaway, 'Eh-oh Laa Laa!' The Observer, 25 May 1997, p. 20
- ¹⁸Kellaway, 25 May 1997
- ¹⁹Williamson, 5 July 1997
- ²⁰Janine Gibson, 'Potty about po and ga-ga over Laa Laa', The Observer, 8 June 1997, p. 7
- ²¹The debate was framed in a similar way in later reporting of the debate about "Teletubbies" at the International Children's Television Conference, see for example, Rob Brown, 'Dumb or not? Nations battle over "Teletubbies"', The Independent March 10 1998, p. 6
- ²²John Carvel, 'Parents told to sign reading pledge', The Guardian, 29 July 1997, p. 1
- ²³McCann, 25 August 1997
- ²⁴Francis Wheen, 'Wheen's World', The Guardian, 20 August 1997, p. 5
- ²⁵Francis Wheen, 'Wheen's World', The Guardian, 30 July 1997, p. 5
- ²⁶Tim Footman, 'For the love of Bod', The Guardian, 14 August 1997, p. 12
- ²⁷Wheen, 20 August 1997
- ²⁸Footman, 14 August 1997
- ²⁹For a description of these websites, see Gregory Gutenko, 'Deconstructing "Teletubbies": Differences between UK and US college students' reading of the children's television programme', <http://iml.umkc.edu/comm/faculty/gutenko/papers/>
- ³⁰Stuart Millar, 'Boo hoo at Tinky Winky's bye bye', The Guardian, 28 July 1997, p. 3
- ³¹Footman, 14 August 1997
- ³²Kellaway, 25 May 1997
- ³³Wheen, 20 August 1997
- ³⁴William Leith, The Observer, 26 June 1997, p. 56
- ³⁵McCann, August 25 1997
- ³⁶'Pass Notes: Tinky Winky', The Guardian, 29 July 1997, p. 3
- ³⁷McCann, August 25 1997

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