

## UK perspective from Sonia Livingstone

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**T**wenty years ago, when such a major piece of research was published in the USA, British researchers sought to replicate it in the UK, keen to determine whether similar or different findings would obtain. In today's globalised media and communications environment, US-based research will, in many ways, suffice for the UK context. For the online content that UK children engage overlaps considerably with that available to US children and, indeed, to children worldwide. But national differences still matter in drawing out the implications of these findings. British cultures of childhood and parenting differ from the US, and so do the regulatory bodies - statutory, self-regulatory and voluntary - that manage conditions of children's access to content. Herein lies an intriguing problem, for the Kaiser report's calls for regulatory responses are not merely based on American research but also reflect US norms regarding parental responsibility, consumer socialisation and children's media literacy. And they are targeted towards the US

legislative and regulatory regime.

Here in the UK, I suggest we can accept the Kaiser report's findings as an adequate account of UK children's exposure to online advertising. Not a perfect account, for UK children are exposed to a somewhat different online environment - more public sector-provided sites, for instance, or commercial sites linked to different television programmes. Commissioning a parallel study to estimate the nature and scope of online advertising encountered by UK children would thus be valuable.

But what we really need, and urgently, is new research on the significance of online advertising for UK children (1, 2). Children understand, by and large, and depending on their age, what is advertising on television, or in magazines, or on the radio, and what is not. And parents know how to respond, though they may not do so in practice. Online, distinguishing advertising or sponsorship from other content is a new challenge. We simply do not know if or how well UK children do this.

Nor whether their parents or teachers are able to advise them. Nor, most important, whether children are influenced by the burgeoning array of techniques being developed.

Such evidence as exists suggests that UK children receive little guidance in internet literacy and so lack the skills to evaluate online content. If this report had revealed only a minority of television adverts were clearly marked off from programmes, or that fewer than half of television adverts complied with the self-regulatory body's guidelines, there would be an outcry, and the situation would be judged unfair to children (and parents). I suggest the same response would be appropriate for online advertising.

### References

1. Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone (2006). Harm and Offence in Media Content. Intellect.
2. Sonia Livingstone (2006). New research on advertising foods to children. Ofcom. [www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/foodads/foodadsprint/annex9.pdf](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/foodads/foodadsprint/annex9.pdf)