

Parents, Kids & Policymakers in the Digital Age

Safeguarding Against "Techno-Panics"

BY ADAM THIERER

A cursory review of the history of media and communications technologies reveals a reoccurring cycle of “techno-panics” – public and political crusades against the use of new media or technologies by the young. From the waltz to rock-and-roll to rap music, from movies to comic books to video games, from radio and television to the Internet and social networking Web sites, every new media format or technology has spawned a fresh debate about the potential negative effects they might have on kids.

Inevitably, fueled by media sensationalism and various activist groups, these social and cultural debates quickly become political debates. Indeed, each of the media technologies or outlets mentioned above was either regulated or threatened with regulation at some point in its history. And the cycle continues today. During recent sessions

of Congress, countless hearings were held and bills introduced on a wide variety of media and content-related issues. These proposals dealt with broadcast television and radio programming, cable and satellite television content, video games, the Internet, social networking sites and much more. State policymakers, especially state attorneys

general (AGs), also have joined in such crusades on occasion. The recent push by AGs for mandatory age verification for all social networking sites is merely the latest example.

What is perhaps most ironic about these techno-panics is how quickly yesterday’s boogeyman becomes tomorrow’s accepted medium, even as



Adam Thierer is a Senior Fellow with The Progress & Freedom Foundation in Washington, D.C. and an advisor to the Telecom & IT Task Force. He is also the author of *Parental Controls & Online Child Protection: Survey of Tools & Methods*, and the co-author of *Manifesto for Media Freedom* (Encounter: 2008).

the new villains replace old ones. For example, the children of the 1950s and '60s were told that Elvis's hip shakes and the rock-and-roll revolution would make them all the tools of the devil. They grew up fine and became parents themselves, but then promptly began criticizing rap music and video games in the '80s and '90s. And now those aging Pac Man-era parents are worried sick about their kids being abducted by predators lurking on MySpace and Facebook. We shouldn't be surprised if, a decade or two from now, today's Internet generation will be decrying the dangers of virtual reality.

These techno-panics are almost always disproportionate to the real risk posed by new media and technology, which typically do not have the corrupting influence on youth that older generations fear. Parents and public policymakers alike need to remember they were once kids, too, and managed to live through many of the same fears and concerns about media and popular culture. As the late University of North Carolina journalism professor Margaret A. Blanchard once noted: "[P]arents and grandparents who lead the efforts to cleanse today's society seem to forget that they survived alleged attacks on their morals by different media when they were children. Each generation's adults either lose faith in the ability of their young people to do the same or they become convinced that the dangers facing the new generation are much more substantial than the ones they faced as children." And Thomas Hine, author of *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, argues that: "We seem to have moved, without skipping a beat, from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children. We want them to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we've never managed to break."



From Elvis to video games, parents and policymakers need to engage kids in an on-going conversation.

The better response by both parents and policymakers is a measured and balanced approach to children's exposure to media content and online interactions. All-or-nothing extremes are never going to work. In particular, techno-panics are hopelessly counter-productive. "Fear, in many cases, is leading to overreaction, which in turn could give rise to greater problems as young people take detours around the roadblocks we think we are erecting," argue John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, authors of *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*. What parents, educators and policymakers need to understand, they argue, "is that the traditional values and common sense that have served them well in the past will be relevant in this new world, too."

Most simply, we need to be willing to talk to our kids about the new technologies and cultural developments that shape their generation. When we as parents (or policymakers) do not fully comprehend or appreciate the new-fangled gadget in our kids' pocket – or whatever they are playing, watching or listening to on it – instead of engaging in

demagoguery and driving a wedge between us and them, we should instead invite them to have a conversation with us about it. Ask three simple questions to get that conversation started: "What is this new thing all about?" "Tell me how you use it." "Why is it important to you?" Once you've got them talking to you, good ole' fashioned common sense and timeless parenting principles should kick in. "Do you understand why too much of this might be bad for you?" "Will you please come talk to me if you don't understand something you've seen or heard?" And so on.

In sum, it's about parental responsibility and rational, measured responses. The techno-panic mentality, by contrast, creates distrust and distance between our kids and us. As Anne Collier of Net Family News notes, techno-panics "cause fear, which interferes with parent-child communication, which in turn puts kids at greater risk."

Parents and policymakers need to engage kids in an ongoing conversation about the technologies *du jour* – even when we don't fully understand or appreciate them. ||