

Too much, too young?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Society risks losing touch with reality in the debate about whether children are being exposed to adult, sexual content too young, because other agendas are creeping in "under the radar", a new analysis warns.

The comments appear in a new University of Cambridge study, which examines the current dispute about whether media such as music videos, girls' magazines and corporate advertising are having a dangerous effect on children by exposing them to adult sexual themes.

Earlier this year, a Home Office report called for the tougher regulation of sexual imagery in advertisements and a ban on selling "lads' mags" to under-16s, because of concerns that they were encouraging the

"harmful" sexualisation of young people.

The new Prime Minister, David Cameron, has similarly called for a website to be set up which would enable parents to complain about the "offensive" marketing tactics of companies accused of contributing to the same process.

Writing in the *Media International Australia* journal, however, University of Cambridge [sociologist](#) Robbie Duschinsky warns that the debate is being hijacked by deeper concerns about social status and respectability.

His study examines some of the most recent contributions to the dispute, both from those who argue that children are being endangered by "corporate paedophilia" and those who claim that the issue has been overblown.

In both cases, it finds evidence that their perspectives are being clouded by other agendas. In particular, it suggests that arguments for more restrictions on children's access to the media are, in some cases, being interwoven with a more sinister concern about the "corrupting" influence of black or working-class culture.

"There is a possibility that this debate, which we think is about protecting the young, has become more to do with what it means to be respectably middle-class in modern society," Duschinsky said.

"In condemning the sexualisation of children, we are increasingly making statements about who is acting acceptably and who is not. That seems to be allowing other social and political agendas, regarding key issues like class and race, to be smuggled in under the radar."

The debate about children's sexualisation has focused in particular on young girls, who, some argue, are being encouraged to develop an

unhealthy obsession with their image and desirability before they have hit adolescence. Others have dismissed the argument as self-righteous "moral panic" which draws attention away from real issues of child abuse.

Duschinsky suggests that both sides of the debate are being distorted by other concerns. On the one hand, his paper agrees with recent counter-criticism of the liberal stance taken by academic and cultural "elites" (for instance, commentators in left-leaning newspapers). Often, it suggests, these groups attack popular concerns about sex in the media because in doing so, they shore up their own identity as a class apart from the "hysterical masses".

At the same time, however, his research finds repeated examples where critics who raise concerns about young people's sexualisation appear also to be making judgements about society as a whole.

These arguments often suggest that there is a moral issue at stake. The paper cites, for example, a recent 2009 book which tackled the issue of sexualisation of young people in relatively sensationalist terms - deploring the "prostitutional behaviours" of young girls in modern society - before proposing a return to monogamous romantic relationships as the "solution to a widespread immorality and cultural malaise."

Other writers, including mainstream academic commentators, have linked the perceived threat to childhood innocence with particular cultural genres which, like rap and hip-hop, are particularly associated with black and working-class people. In the process, Duschinsky suggests, these groups themselves are being implicitly portrayed as a threat to a "respectable," middle-class, and often white picture of childhood innocence.

The paper calls for a more careful, level-headed approach to the media sexualisation debate. It suggests that, problematically, the argument is being used by different interest groups to "police society". At the same time, this means that the question of whether children should be more protected from sexual imagery in the media is not being addressed properly.

"Policy-makers in particular should take note of the fact that there is class and race-based rhetoric creeping into this discussion," Duschinsky added. "The call to protect childhood innocence has been and can be used to progressive ends. But it is also, increasingly, being used to support other, perhaps less palatable, arguments about social policy."

The paper, *Feminism, Sexualisation and Social Status*, appears in the May 31st issue of the journal *Media International Australia*.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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