

Calling Out the Infantry

Technological Babies in a Carefree World of Consumption Without Consequence



The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Speech Communication

By Shannan H. Butler

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Teletubbies is a celebration of children's play. In a world of technology, this new series introduces young children--ages one and above to the wonders and magic of high-tech in a safe and friendly way. Tinky Winky, Dipsy, Laa-Laa, and Po are four technological babies who love each other very much and live happily together in their own world of childhood imagination. Each program features the Teletubbies in Teletubbyland, which hums with the play technology that supplies their every need: Tubby Toast, Tubby Custard and a conscientious comic vacuum cleaner, Noo-Noo. The Teletubbies tummies become TV screens that light up, bringing them pictures of happy children from the real world because, next to each other, the Teletubbies love children best of all.

--PBS Teletubbies Introduction Website

There must be something sinister at the heart of *Teletubbies*, a British import which premiered on the BBC over a year before its introduction in the United States. The current PBS hit has become cause for parental concern and not a little puzzlement. Initially, British press sent out a cry that the series didn't give children a proper story--merely things happened--such as Laa-Laa eats toast (Diamond 48). Or that the *Teletubbies* were becoming an "all-purpose pacifier that buys [parents] blocks of time" (Edelstien 3). "*Teletubbies* is conditioning your child to be baby-sat by a television for the rest of (his or her) life," decried *White Dot*, an American anti-television magazine, "It's inappropriate to make TV for children who can't talk yet . . . by putting television in to the tummy of a (TV character), they are trying to forge an emotional bond in children with television itself."

More recently, the World Summit on Children's Television branded *Teletubbies* as "vaguely evil" (Duffy) While *Spectator* magazine pronounced it, "bizarre, lurid,

disturbing and mind-numbingly repetitive” (Brunton). Joyce Millman of *Salon* magazine saw the “loathsome rat-baby visages” as:

indoctrination so naked and pure it’s almost farcical. On the show a human babies face inside a sunburst in the sky functions as a visual cue, telling little viewers how they should respond to what they’re seeing. And the tummy-TV blatantly internalize TV watching, making it a part of the Tubbies’ selves, a part of their doughy couch potato bodies.

Reports sprang up that the show was linked to the drug culture in London--that the windmill dispersed sparkling pink LSD to the Tubby citizenry. College students were accused of being incessant closet Tubby fans. One outed Tubby watcher confessed, “Of course we watched them for a laugh, a giggle, kitsch value, boredom--but it’s far, far deeper than that. We watched because, whether we were just coming down from that 2am E[cstasy], or away from home and missing our mums, we needed something secure.” (Kulkarni 11). Even fundamentalist Jerry Falwell has leapt into the foray charging that Tinky Winky is blatantly homosexual. “He is purple--the gay-pride color; and his antenna is shaped like a triangle--the gay-pride symbol,” says Falwell who sees the red patent-leather accessorizing Tubby as a threat to youthful morality (*Parents Alert*).

In the face of a steady stream of negative media criticism, PBS and the BBC have worked hard to deflect such charges by providing a “parent’s guide” brochure with the videos and a website dedicated to the proper way in which to view the *Teletubbies*. Both PBS and the BBC are very much concerned that the show be seen as educational and not just a technological baby sitter. Alice Cahn, director of children’s programming for PBS says, “The series is designed to motivate play, encourage curiosity, and stimulate imagination. . . . *Teletubbies* is the loveliest, most exciting and warmest series for young people that I’ve ever seen” (Duffy). PBS’s Website spins the *Teletubbies* as a:

responsible, enjoyable half-hour where our youngest viewers find their place: a playful, imaginative world inhabited by gentle, loving characters exploring and experiencing everything around them. The series is also a wonderful opportunity for parents to share the joy of first discovery through children's eyes."

So, what is going on with the Tubbies? How have they gained such cultural press so quickly? What can we learn from the program? Is *Teletubbies* truly a forward thinking program designed to educate young minds? What kind of world is it constructing for its viewers? Eric Zorn of the *Chicago Tribune* asserts that, "if you possess the language skills to utter an unkind sentence about the Teletubbies, then by definition, you're overqualified to critique it" (1). There is some truth here, as an ethnographical study of the show's supposed target audience would prove quite impossible. But although *Teletubbies* is made for children, it is made by adults, and adults make up a majority of its viewership.

So what are we adults saying to the newly initiated? What discourses are the very young being offered in the *Teletubbies*? By way of setting up a rationale for looking at the *Teletubbies*, let me offer a scant theoretical underpinning, firstly an observation and secondly a critical review. Considering television and its worth as cultural arbiter, Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* offers this observation:

And so, I raise no objection to television's junk. the best things on television are its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations. The irony here is that this is what intellectuals and critics are constantly urging television to do. The trouble with such

people is that they do not take television seriously enough. For, like the printing press, television is nothing less than a philosophy of rhetoric. To talk seriously about television, one must therefore talk of epistemology.

All other commentary is in itself trivial. (Postman 16)

On a similar note, and in critique of cultural re-creator Walt Disney, Henry A. Giroux sets up his critique of corporate culture and its pedagogical impact in the following paragraph:

That corporate culture is rewriting the nature of children's culture becomes clear as the boundaries once maintained between spheres of formal education and that of entertainment collapse into one another. To be convinced of this one only has to consider a few telling events from the growing corporate interests in schools as profit-making ventures, the production of curricular materials by toy companies, or the increasing use of school space for advertising consumer goods. . . . At issue for parents, educators and others is how culture, or particularly media culture, has become a substantive, if not primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set up the norms and conventions that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions. (Giroux *Rodent* 1-2)

Using these insights into ways of looking at television as epistemological and pedagogical in nature, I wish to critically explore the *Teletubbies* from four perspectives: environment/technology, community, authority, and production. Through this critique I think it will become clear that the only thing sinister at the heart of the *Teletubbies* is the driving beat of the corporate market which, for its very survival, must produce consumers with little or no power over their own actions.

As the PBS Website proclaims, the Teletubbies live in a peculiar environment, that of Teletubbyland, "which hums with play technology that supplies their every

need: Tubby Toast, Tubby Custard and a conscientious comic vacuum cleaner, Noo-Noo.” The physical setting of Teletubbyland is a creative concentric mix with futuristic antiseptic technology at its core, pastoral fantasy playground surrounding, and beyond the Teletubbies reach, is the actual vista of the farm near Stratford-upon-Avon where the series is filmed. The Tubbies eat, sleep, and dance within the cold earth covered dome which is the center of Teletubbyland. There is no warmth here, only cold slick walls and light--and at the core, the computer the controller of Teletubbyland. Here, technology has taken center stage. As one moves away from the core one gets further and further away from the technology that sustains. Technology nourishes, soothes, and calls the Tubbies. Po, the youngest, is the most intrigued with the controls at the center of the universe. Beyond the Tubbies reach exists a world that must seem both foreign and exotic--the world of “true” children's play, of “real” children's lives. The Tubbies connect with this wild world only through mediation--through the orgiastic experience of technology internalized. I will discuss this more later, but let us now turn to the troubling perpetual economy of the technological state.

Here in Teletubbyland there is no production, not in any real sense. All that is needed is produced by the loving machines that surround the Techno Babies. There are no raw materials, nothing is used to make the Tubby Custard or Tubby Toast. There are no chickens to produce eggs for the Custard, no fields of grain for the toast. Beyond this, there are no laborers to harvest, no cooks to prepare the ingredients, for in Teletubbyland there is no work--only play. No materials, no labor, and in the end no waste. There is no energy consumed by the elaborate computer/technological complex and no production of unwanted refuse. Even the rabbits that populate the fantasy playground do not produce feces or burrow for shelter. The Tubbies live in a system that produces through technology without the needs for external input. There is no “want” for anything. If you desire Tubby toast you press a button and you have Tubby toast. If the techno-toaster malfunctions and produces a raining of Tubby toast, you as

a Tubby don't get upset or concerned over unneeded consumption, you merely have fun and play with it. Noo-Noo, the vacuum cleaner is always concerned with tidying up. He will take care of your toast and your spilled Tubby custard. There is never a need to worry about consumption or waste. There is no shortage of anything and no pollution. No matter what happens in Tubbyland one has only to shrug it off and move on to the next play. Where then does responsibility get articulated in Teletubbyland? Here we must confront an interesting result of technological incorporation and that is a question of the internal and external.

Who are the Teletubbies? The literature from the shows creator Anne Woods suggests that the Tubbies reflect their viewing audience (children as young as one year old) (Kelleher 24). Those television sets in their Tubby tummies pose troubling questions. If we are to identify with the Tubbies then we identify with technology, specifically television. When the communication from without (yet within) comes, the communication from the "real" children comes--where am I? Do I identify with the Techno Babies who connect with the "real" only through mediation (yet mediation within) or do I identify with the children who are mediated to the Tubbies. And yet both are other, and yet I can identify with both because both are mediated one to another and I to them. For I am watching the television and I am taking this into myself. The crucial question here is the incorporation of technology into the self--the very self is constructed by being a mediation. A truism that is communicated in the orgiastic process of message reception is that I am called out, chosen. Let us look at the process of the reception of alterity within the Teletubbies as it has confused many a critic, and this one alike.

First there is a sound like the rushing of wind. Then we, as Tubbies, as viewers, see the windmill on the hill spinning and showering out sparks of pink light. We, as Tubbies, are caught up in a frenzy and head for the hills (quite literally). There we introduce ourselves by name as our TVs within light up in sequence. We then fall to the

ground flailing about as each of our antennae light up. Then one is chosen, and like an orgasm he or she is filled with delight to receive the communication from afar. All of the other Tubbies are filled with delight and envy as they watch the screen within the chosen to see the mediated other. Herein, is a scene much like the coming of the orgiastic god in Patocka's account of the repressed Platonic nature revealed in Derrida's *The Gift of Death*. Here, the media comes, like a god, completely other, and in its coming the reveler is destroyed and the other replaces him or her (27). Here is a place of Tubby ecstasy, and a place of no communion. Here the god/media/other comes and the I is destroyed. Who are the Tubbies? Who are we to the Tubbies? In the Tubbies is held the secret of separation and otherness both externally and internally--all is mediation, and in the mediation is the absence of responsibility one to another. There is responsibility only to the god of mediation, the authority that comes from without (yet within).

Many critics have been concerned that the Teletubbies have no structure, narrative, or supervision. They merely "play all day and answer to no-one" (Brunton). This could not be further from the truth as the Teletubbies every move is monitored from within and determined from without. The voice of authority announces the Tubbies beginnings and the Tubbies endings through the "voice trumpets" of technology. This indeed fits Jean-Luc Nancy's definition, quite blatantly, of the presence of a society. For Nancy society is the place of birth and death, and the happening of the external self (26). The voice trumpets are a socializing agent. Whatever they are (as they sometimes frighten small children, and at least one author assumes that the Tubbies are tormented by them night and day), they are the voice of authority. They announce the birth of the Tubbies, "Time for Teletubbies," and they announce the death of Tubbies, "Time for Tubby bye-bye. . ." This calling out and putting away of beings is strongly authoritarian and objectifying. Other narrators tell the Tubbies what they must do-- "run-away Tinky Winky . . . run-away Po!" The

Tubbies must live, indeed, in a state of neurosis having to always do what the “voice trumpets” tell them. In addition, they must self-reflexively address the camera, for we are watching. And there is the little sun-god in the sky. The child faced sunshine that monitors every Tubby move, voicing his appreciation in a childish cackle and grin. All is well in Tubbyland as long as we play along. The voice of parent, state, media, advertiser, the voice of authority is indeed here in Teletubbyland.

Here in this closed society--a community of no connection, a community of no responsibility except to the media, of no substance except of the media--what's a Tubby to do? One should be the media, the mediated, the commercial. One must desire and play. The Tubbies desire communion but receive only mediation. The commercial capitalist tendencies of media are constitutive of Teletubbyland. They do have possessions and it is only in the rare case of a misplaced possession that they do get upset. Tinky Winky one day goes about Teletubbyland one day with his red bag and picks up a ball, hat, and scooter and places them into his bag. Come to find out they belong to the other rather perturbed Tubbies. Po has her scooter, Dipsy his hat, and Laa-Laa her ball. These seem to represent well the content of media, that of consumerism (Tinky Winky's bag), fashion (Dipsy's hat), entertainment (Laa-Laa's ball), and transportation/communication/delivery (Po's scooter). Are the Tubbies capitalists? It is the system into which they are born, therefore it doesn't seem strange to assume these traits within. Other than play, what can the Tubbies then do? They can desire? And for what? That which is given--the media. “Again, again,” cry the Tubbies after the mediated orgy of otherness, and the video clip is played again in its entirety. Similar to the arguments expressed by Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland in *Commodify Your Dissent*, it seems the only option for the Tubbies is to consume that which is offered or allowed (35). There is no true freedom.

The BBC is so proud of the *Teletubbies* for its progressive social norms, yet what has really changed? The social roles identified with sexuality and ethnicity seem

strangely reinforced within. Although the roles are shaken up somewhat, such as Tinky Winky's adoption by the gay community because of his garish red bag/purse (Kulkarni 11), other roles remain quite static. Consequently, Itsy Bitsy (the programs distributor) has denied this association stating, "to think we would be putting sexual innuendo in a children's show is kind of outlandish . . . the Teletubbies haven't even hit puberty yet" (*Falwell Says*). Reinforcing gendered norms, the two males Tinky Winky and Dipsy are both taller, older, and speak in deeper voices than the females Laa-Laa and Po. They also seem to exude more authority. If there is a leader of the group it must be Tinky Winky. Dipsy seems an eccentric not confined by the group. Other extremely subtle "natural" male/female distinctions are expressed in the characters. The antennae of Tinky Winky and Dipsy are very much angular (Dipsy's blatantly phallic) whereas Po and Laa-Laa have antennae with curves. Females are, again, culturally constructed as soft and curvy and males as hard and angular. Maybe, going a bit further, and too far underneath, the Tubbies are associated with the primary colors of light and pigment--that is except the troubling Tinky Winky. Po is a very feminine pigment red. Laa-Laa and Dipsy exist as the primary colors that differ between the pigment and light spectrums. Dipsy takes on the color of green, the missing component in light (sky), and Laa-Laa takes on yellow, the missing component in pigment (earth). Mythologically, men have always been associated with sky gods and women with Chthonic goddesses (Wilber 194). Merely being in a culture where these traditions are foundational makes them quite likely, thus, they may well be unconscious, but may be indicative of other forms of "naturalness" that exist within the *Teletubbies*. The choosing of the primary colors for three of the Tubbies and a secondary color, purple (a mix of the feminized red and masculinized blue), for Tinky Winky indicates his supposed difference (somewhere between masculine and feminine). Each Tubby also has unique physical characteristics and slightly different skin tones. Dipsy being the darkest and the only one with a widows peak. Yet, these outward differences (and alleged internal

dispositions) do not lead to different traditions, rather conformity is stressed in Teletubbyland. If indeed diversity is sought, then why is even the British narrator's voice replaced in the U.S. by a narrator sporting an American accent?

Teletubbies is a valiant attempt at something new, something that pushes the boundaries of children's television, but in the end it continues to construct many of the problems it has supposedly set out to alleviate. Although charming and creative, Teletubbies leaves us ethically, communally, and pedagogically empty. Teletubbies does achieve a certain epistemology, that of reinforcing the capitalistic consumer culture of no consequence which we are already within. How then does this occur within institutions supposedly championing the public good, namely the BBC and PBS? There have been, of late, many changes within both the BBC and PBS. They are both moving towards a market driven commodity. The BBC has shifted from a more hierarchical approach of management to producer choice which has had the effect of giving the people what they want. And as Martin Harris says in his essay on the rise of producer choice, this is rarely a good thing, "[The BBC] is not a business trying to distribute dosh to its shareholders, not owned by its current administrators. . . but something held in trust and in law for every citizen . . . of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" (158).

But this new approach is making money (around 23 million pounds this year) and the BBC will see part of the profit (*Teletubbies Pad*). After seeing the Tubbies success in Britain last year, PBS purchased the rights of broadcast from Itsy-Bitsy the shows distributor (Stanley *Teletubbies* 6). Rag Doll is the company that produces the program for the BBC and PBS, and unlike the Children's Television Workshop, Rag Doll is very much a "for profit" company (Siegel 16). This shift toward the market's desires, financially profits the producer, distributor, and networks. And with the seal of authenticity which is derived from association with PBS parents feel more comfortable buying into the consumer product line now available at your local Wal-Mart or Toys-R-

Us. One can bring home numerous versions of the stuffed “plush” Tubbies, Tubby videos, Tubby CDs, Tubby games, Tubby books, Tubby chocolates, Tubby slippers, and a wealth of other Tubby paraphernalia (Stanley *Takeover* 9).

There is even a corporate sponsor for the PBS series and series of video tapes. The Kellogg’s logo complete with flower and sun rising above rolling green hills seems to mimic Teletubbyland. The brochure that comes with the videos is designed to help parents understand how to maximally view the program with their children (Duggan). This brochure also handily proffers coupons for Kellogg’s Rice Krispies (\$1.00 off on any two cereals). Kellogg’s Rice Krispies was chosen because it isn’t “a sugar laden candy cereal,” says spokesmen for Itsy Bitsy (Stanley *Teletubbies* 6). But of course, says Kellogg, this isn’t advertising its part of their “celebration of the joy of children growing through imagination and creative play” (Duggan). PBS’s current home page link to the Kellogg’s home page certainly raises questions about their current drive towards a marketplace approach.

Teletubbies is indeed public pedagogy, but not as it pretends, a pedagogy interested in the public good. Rather, the corporate profits being raked in by the series alone are enough to make the show’s educational goals suspect. *Teletubbies* may have a perplexing new look but the ideology is the same. From the interior of the program’s “lessons” about how we are “to be” to the exterior of the program’s production and the commodities it produces for consumption, *Teletubbies* falls into an old trap, vaguely new, that keeps the subject encased in corporate capitalism without hope for personal agency. Its active targeting of those not even a year old as irresponsible consumers is unconscionable. Maybe, as one writer has already mused, it is indeed “time for Tubby bye-bye.”

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Calling Out the Infantry:

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Without Consequence

Abstract:

This essay argues that popular concerns about the *Teletubbies* are legitimate, but not because of *Teletubbies* unconventional newness, rather, because it enforces current cultural norms. *Teletubbies* is critiqued from the perspective of environment, community, authority, and production. Corporate market production is implicated in the construction of viewer as powerless consumer.