

# The Documentary as 'amplification': Holding the Baby and politics of attachment

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*Under headings The Cultural Context, The Industrial Context, The Historical Context and The After Effect an empirical study is made of a particular, and highly controversial, British documentary. In the 1990s in the UK, there was a sudden flowering of programmes on the topic of childcaring, and in particular at the first investigation of the subject on UK television, Channel 4's Holding the Baby. This article explores the institutional and cultural context from which this programme emerged, the way it reflected contemporary debates and then helped drive them in a certain direction. The significance of the role of the documentary in contributing to opinion formation is discussed and assessed.*

Documentary - childcaring - cultural context

*Com os títulos The Cultural Context, The Industrial Context, The Historical Context e The After Effect, é realizado um estudo empírico sobre um particular e muito controverso documentário Britânico. Nos anos 1990, no Reino Unido, havia um florescer repentino de programas cujo assunto era o cuidado de crianças e, em particular, na primeira investigação do assunto sobre a televisão britânica, o Holding the Baby, do Canal 4. Este artigo explora o contexto cultural e institucional no qual este programa emergiu, o modo como ele representa os debates contempo-*

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râneos e o modo como ele colabora na condução destes debates. A importância do papel do documentário na contribuição da formação de opinião também é discutida e avaliada.

Documentário - cuidado de crianças - contexto cultural

*Avec les titres The Cultural Context, The Industrial Context, The Historical Context et The After Effect, ce texte propose un étude empirique a propos d'un film documentaire controversé et bien particulier. À 1990, au Royaume Uni, on a vu un soudain développement des émissions dont les sujets étaient le carence des enfants et, particulièrement, la premier enquête sur ce sujet à la télévision britannique, le Holding the Baby, au Chanel 4. Cet article explore le contexte culturel et institutionnel dans lequel ce programme est né, ainsi que sa façon de réfléchir proprement les débats contemporains sur ce sujet. On discute et évalue aussi l'importance du rôle du film documentaire dans la formation des opinions.*

Documentaire - caresses des enfants - contexte culturel

Con los títulos The Cultural Context, The Industrial Context, The Historical Context y The After Effect, es realizado un estudio empírico sobre un controvertido y muy particular documental británico. En 1990, en el Reino Unido, hubo un crecimiento repentino de programas cuyo asunto era el cuidado de los niños y, en particular, la primera investigación del tema en la televisión británica, el Holding the Baby, en el Canal 4. Este artículo explora el contexto cultural e institucional en que el programa aparece, así como el modo como refleja los debates contemporáneos, en cierto modo, direccionados por el programa. Se discute y evalúa, también, la importancia del papel del filme documental en la formación de opiniones.

Documental - cuidado de los niños - contexto cultural

## The cultural context

A sense of mission has informed documentary making since Grierson. Whether the 'documentary realist' is exploring, reporting, documenting, revealing, advocating or countering orthodoxy the common task is to increase awareness of the society around us; examine it critically with a view to improvement, 'bring the citizen's eye in from the ends of the earth to the story, his own story, of what is happening under his nose...the drama of the doorstep' (Barnouw, 1974: 85). During the last prolific period of current affairs documentaries on British television, in 1985-1995, they took on a variety of forms and involved techniques not known to the early makers of documentaries (Bruzzi, 2000: 153-180), drawing upon current affairs approaches developed from the 1960s (Goddard, 2001: 74); yet the élite which produced them still shared those central purposes and regarded themselves as a creative force in society (Winston, 1995: 24-5) and an élite in TV (Tunstall, 1993: 33-5, 173-4). Rosenthal termed their responsibility that of 'bearing witness' in his aptly titled book *The Documentary Conscience* (Rosenthal, 1980: 31).

Although current affairs documentaries, increasingly labelled 'investigative' continue to be transmitted today, they are much less significant in the schedules, the accent on sensationalism and voyeurism appears greater and it is arguable how much of series such as *Kenyon Confronts*, *McIntyre Undercover* or *Sleepers* really adheres to the social purposes of the original documentary realists. Perhaps those ambitions which earlier generations had for their works could not be realised today. Traditionally, they hoped for the kind of impact upon their audience that might be achieved by the reading of a revelatory book: as Dickens' *Hard Times* obliged his 19<sup>th</sup> century readership to look around and see their society anew, as did Upton Sinclair when he published *The Jungle* in 1906. Today the audience is more sceptical of having its eyes opened (Kilborn, 1997: 236), the competition for its attention is more intense as it skips through rival channels to find something diverting rather than educative; it has the power to time shift and much greater choice.

In the early 1990s such opportunities for the audience to avoid programmes making demands upon their consciences were not so many

and it was still possible for documentary makers to believe that they could make their statement and influence attitudes, even if the reality was that they probably, even then, had less influence upon their viewers than they supposed. With Brundson and Morley's study of *Nationwide* in 1978 had begun a reassessment of our ideas about the effects of the media upon us which has led to general acceptance today that there is no direct, causal, relationship between viewing and behaviour; that many factors determine how audiences will 'read' a text from gender (Brundson, 1978) to group affiliation (Comer, 1990: 229) onwards; and that meanings are the result of negotiation between audience and text. In 1986 Wiseman wrote: "The importance of documentaries as political instruments for change is stubbornly clung to despite the total absence of any supporting evidence...The basic assumption of [documentary-makers] is that the film is going to be such an important event in the life of the audience that all else will be dropped." (Wiseman, 1986: 40)

Winston elaborated upon this theme:

The record suggests that the media in general and the documentary in particular are actually not powerful *instigators*. Their power resides in their ability to amplify. Thus issues already under consideration within the body politic, situations upon which the whistle is being blown, are more likely to produce films which have an after effect than those dreamed up by the flyblown-eyed documentarists themselves. (Winston, 1995: 237, see also 253)

Taking Winston's observation as cue, I have sought here to go beyond producer self regard, to identify the ways in which a particular documentary came about and to assess its 'after effect', so exposing the dynamics of opinion formation and the place of the documentary in it.

## The industrial context

### Schedules

The discourses of personal life are expressed through many media, and possibly most illuminatingly through drama and soap (for eg see Geraghty, 1983; Chambers, 2000). A documentary is merely one genre of factual programming, itself a modest proportion of all programming; there are different types of documentary, of which the 'current affairs' variety is only one.<sup>1</sup> Of

the many themes selected for representation by current affairs documentaries, childcaring became prominent, according to the data<sup>2</sup> available, after 1989 in which year it did not feature. In 1991 two programmes dealing with different aspects of childcaring were transmitted, a BBC *Public Eye*, 'Network Child Abuse' and a documentary in the series *C4 Dispatches*, 'Holding the Baby'. There were more programmes on the subject in 1992; by 1993 there was a considerable expansion, with 17 units on 'childcaring' (to rise to 24 the following year). The number of programmes on this and related subjects continued to increase every year thereafter.<sup>3</sup>

Given the lead times for factual programmes and series, the issue was exercising the factual media community very much by 1992. The two documentaries of 1991 came in advance of a great upsurge of interest in the issues around childcaring and family life generally and may possibly have acted as a stimulant. The subtopic that caused great controversy was 'childcaring', or the question of whether small children were best placed in professionally run establishments or looked after at home.

#### The hailing of a topic<sup>4</sup>

Elliott identified 'Three main chains through which ideas and material emerge for programmes'. The initial selection of the idea derives from the producer's own knowledge and life experience; whether the idea can be used depends upon commercial and institutional factors; how it is treated depends upon the information and contacts available to the team (Elliott, 1972: ch 2 & 3).

In 1988 the team which was to propose and argue for what eventually was transmitted as 'Holding the Baby' were unknown to each other. The Reporter was writing for *The Times* and shortly to move to the *Daily Mail*, the Director was the producer-director of *Hard News*, a sharp weekly review of the media, and the Producer was, as well as working up documentaries on corruption in the Scottish law courts and malpractice in financial services for *C4 Dispatches*<sup>5</sup>, producing and presenting the second of a series of talk shows for *Scottish Television*, 'Night Flyte', on controversial issues<sup>6</sup>. The scouting for this threw up an article by the *Daily Mail* reporter on the business plans of a US company, *Kindercare*, which intended expanding into the UK. *Kindercare*, according to the article, offered round the clock

baby parking and could solve all the problems of the mother who wanted to get a job outside the home. The writer stated that this was production line, McDonalds style, babycare and, in tune with the *Daily Mail* editorial line, that it was reprehensible (Gerrie, 1987).

Discussion of the supposed plans of *Kindercare* were seen as something that would evoke passions among the target audience, so 'childcaring' came to be the subject of one of the *Night Flytes*. The anticipated emotions were expressed strongly both on the programme itself and at audience feedback. Viewers in the childcaring professions wrote in to tell the production team that there had been 'problems' with institutional childcaring in the US, including maltreatment of children by care providers and claims by academic researchers that institutional childcaring stunts intellectual growth.

So successful was the topic in attracting attention that it was written up in one-page proposal form by the *Night Flyte* team (HIB, 1998) and sent to *C4 Dispatches*. Although the issue was not one which they had 'found within themselves' in the Grierson sense, they felt that here was something which mattered enormously to many people and which was not being aired by the opinion forming élite, hence its potential value to C4 as stock in trade. Commissioning Editors view vast numbers of proposals and are moved by many considerations. The most important is survival - to survive they must show that they are having impact. With the BBC or ITV this usually, though not always, is proved by ratings figures. With C4, as with broadsheet newspapers, impact may equally well be interpreted as response from the target audience of opinion-formers and decision-makers.

So when the *Dispatches* Commissioning Editor decided to look further at this topic, he was moved by the following: a) he had received proposals in this general area and knew that producers were interested, doubtless reflecting an issue emerging in the wider society; b) he believed that this topic was controversial enough to add to his series profile.

His impact upon the proposal would be very significant; it went in stages through a series of meetings over a period of six months when he asked for:

- proof that childcaring was a business in the UK ripe for development

- proof that the US entrepreneurs wanted to expand into the European market
  - proof that there were scandals in the USA
- and, later,
- proof that there was research evidence demonstrating that children might be harmed by childcaring and
  - proof that people in a position to know were ignoring such research evidence.<sup>7</sup>

The team was nervous, after investing time and effort, that the angle was becoming too skewed towards research, as it did not look as if there were much conclusive evidence as to whether childcaring was good or not for children.<sup>8</sup> However, although he was disappointed that there was little or no UK research, the Editor decided that they should see this lacuna as a strength. He said that "*Dispatches* will argue that it is disgraceful that the Government should encourage more mothers of young children to work when the effects have not been considered" (HIB, 1998); the process illustrates rather well Bruzzi's depiction of documentaries as reflecting "conflict between objectivity and subjectivity" and "performative because they acknowledge the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film" (Bruzzi, 2000: 8).

The treatment conformed to a classic current affairs approach in which there are victims, villains and various subplots, which eventually integrate to make the case. "Documentary....occupies no fixed territory. It mobilizes no finite inventory of techniques" (Nichols, 1991: 7). There were several parallel narratives to personalise and render concrete in the manner which *Dispatches*, in particular, had adopted in its attempt to connect the serious with the popular... "to entertain in order to inform, to inform in order to educate" (Porter, 1999: 181). They included the narratives of a particular little girl, a childminder, various young mothers, a particular nursery and its proprietor, how the research of an academic psychologist, Belsky, had been undertaken, replicated in other countries and received in the academy.

It also featured, by way of additional testimonial, a US nursery which it constructed as providing impersonal mass production, clips from secret filming of US nurseries showing neglect and malpractice by staff.

The project was extensively pre-planned as is essential where the number of shooting days, access to graphics and editing and the transmission date are all fixed in advance and virtually regardless of topic. However, the team was not inflexible. During the course of filming in a high profile nursery, an example of bad practice occurred (a child apparently being slapped) and was shot. This was then shown to a child psychologist who was filmed at the viewing showing her professional disapproval and reinforcing the message that commercial organisations could not be trusted to deliver reliable childcaring.

Not only were companies in the business of childcaring implied to be flawed but the accused - officials and academics of the 'childcaring establishment' - appeared shifty and perhaps malevolent<sup>9</sup> as they avoided answering questions. In summary, the documentary's main arguments were: a) childcaring is one of the biggest issues society faces; b) for their own interests it suits business - both those that profit from childcaring and those that profit from creating a market in low wage second earners - that mothers enter the job market; c) these interests have used the rhetoric of feminism and choice as a cover for their interests; d) they have won the support of institutions such as the Confederation of British Industry (the employers' organisation) and of government to promote what interests them, not what is in the interests of children; e) but such research as there is says that institutional childcaring too young or for too many hours a day is bad for small children; f) in hock to vested commercial and ideological interests, government won't listen. The treatment amounted to an attack on the conventional wisdom.

## The historical context

### Change of discourse

The 1950s assumptions<sup>10</sup>, that full-time motherhood and the married nuclear family were not only the essential cement of society but also requirements of a successful upbringing of children, had first come under attack in the 1960s, most famously from Edmund Leach's Reith Lectures of 1967. Historians questioned whether the nuclear family was natural or

merely a recent construction<sup>11</sup>. Bowlby's attachment theory<sup>12</sup> was scorned (Fletcher, 1988: ch2). Feminists suggested that the nuclear family existed only to oppress women and that the supposed needs of children could be met equally well without it (Tong, 1989: ch2); from this it followed that all the efforts of the therapists to make mothers more conscious of their role and to invest even more heavily in it were merely reflections of patriarchal prejudice. As Morgan put it:

I have come a long way from the Maternal Deprivation Theory (...) These doctrines are part of an intellectual atmosphere which is in every sense bankrupt and which should now be consciously repudiated; a tradition which wilfully ignores the influences of human culture, society, learning and rationality in the life of an individual, because it has ceased to see individuals in a social context at all. For far too long this attitude has reflected, justified and perpetuated a social state of affairs in which the norm for the whole population is isolated, independent, child-centred nuclear families, whose values and aspirations are properly expected to be exclusively home centred and individualistic: a society without social entities. (Morgan, 1975 : 338).

Childcaring came to seem irrelevant in political terms; improvements in material conditions diminished the social value of the traditional family. People were taught that the state could do better than ignorant, clumsy individuals (Fox-Harding, 1997: ch3) and this was particularly apparent in matters of reproduction and childcaring. As Lady (Helen) Brook, an influential figure of the period, leading light of the family planning movement and founder (in 1963) of the *Brook Advisory Centres for Young People*, put it: "From birth till death it is now the privilege of the parental state to take major decisions - objective, unemotional, the State weighs up what is best for the child". (Brook, 1980)

Government abolished the *Family Allowance* in the 1970s and replaced it in 1975 by a *Child Benefit*, the value of which was soon allowed to be eroded by inflation, indicating a devaluation of childcaring (Field, 1982:13). Government intervention into childcaring grew, but meanwhile the Reagan-Thatcher counter current was developing.

### Climbing Mont Pelerin

In the 1980s, the influence of the market economists grouped around the *Mont Pelerin Society*<sup>13</sup> was to reposition children as a consumer choice rather than a social responsibility.

Market liberalism held that state preferences and controls should be abolished in economic life - and this also meant that government should do nothing to help or hinder any particular type of childcaring arrangement. Implicit in their writings were the assumptions that childcaring had no normative significance (Papps, 1980; Rose, 1992). Thus market liberalism continued the trend set in the 1960s (though for different reasons!), with government fiscal policy little by little removed from parents the benefits they had gained earlier and allowed to erode other benefits which helped childcaring units. This can be seen as the culmination of a movement to deprivilege childcaring. According to Morgan (1995), this movement transferred resources: 1) from those with children to individuals without dependants; 2) from families with one main earner to couples with two main earners; 3) from younger, child-rearing generations to the retired; 4) from childrearing in the home to childminding outside.

She concluded her critique of the treatment of childcaring: Measured by average, after tax, per capita income, families with children have become the lowest income group - below elderly households, single people and couples without children. (Morgan, 1995 : 38)

It was now claimed that government fiscal policy had, in the preceding 30 years, penalised childcaring to the extent that most children were now brought up in officially-designated poverty (Hewitt, 1993:28). This was in marked contrast to the 1950s, and came about without any stated declaration of policy or intent, as if 'by chance'.

Practices of the self developed in conformity. It became the conventional wisdom that the woman who eschewed motherhood or relegated it to a subordinate position in her life was constructed as having achieved freedom (Walkerdine,1993). By contrast with the previous construction of childcaring as a social duty offering personal fulfilment and a socially honoured identity that was seen in the 1953 BBC series on the family<sup>14</sup> the 'traditional' family was increasingly debunked (Miller,1987:299&c)<sup>15</sup>, the practises of libertarian government now made of childcaring simply another consumer choice. (Davies,1993:96-100)

For everybody in society it was work that had, according to Rose, become the sole way of achieving personal satisfaction, social recognition and (even) relationships. By contrast to the discourse of attachment, caring

for child or home was now not work. (Rose, 1989: 102; Rose, 1992: 142; Leach, 1994:12-13)

### The politics of attachment, circa 1995

In sum, by around 1989 we see a situation whereby childcaring had been emptied of its normative significance; as soon as administration can catch up with policy mothers are to become customers of a professionally produced childcaring (Cohen, 1988: 2-7). The employers' organisation, the *Confederation of British Industry*, wanted mothers liberated from childcaring so that they might fill jobs in industry (CBI, 1989). The employers' official opponents, the trades unions, missed the self-interest behind this policy to increase the labour supply and accept its idealisation as a liberation of mothers from the hearth.

In 1990, however, came the first criticism of fiscal policies by a senior Conservative politician (Joseph, 1990 : 7), to be followed by similar thoughts from Labour (Hewitt, 1993 : 30). A moral call for parents to shoulder their childcaring responsibilities properly was enthusiastically received from a guru-sociologist: "Parents have a moral responsibility to the community to invest themselves in the proper upbringing of their children, and communities (have a moral responsibility) to enable parents to so dedicate themselves" .(Etzioni, 1991: 6)

This is reminiscent of the language of the 1950s. What has happened? Rising crime, latch-key children, decline of marriage, child abuse and poor school performance were all being cited as reasons to attend to childcaring; responsibility is found in feckless fathers, mothers going out to work and the failure of marriages (Thomas, 1996). Childcaring became a big issue although there was no consensus on how to approach it (Fox-Harding, 1997: 7; Pugh, 1994). The attacks on single mothers, the therapies of 'Relate' [the national organisation aiming to prevent marriage breakdown] (Walker, 1995), the foregrounding of the delinquent boy and the new-found sympathy for the economic plight of the childcarers are all one: A consensus is emerging that 'childcaring' has to be 're-established'. In the table are selected manifestations of its emergence.

The professional organisations which, in the 1970s, discounted the significance of parents in childcaring now became worried about the lack

of parental input. Of the many seminars and conferences 2 should be singled out. In March 1995 Professor Lynne Murray<sup>16</sup> was the toast of a conference at the Tavistock Institute for the most progressive of the 'psy professions' and several Labour politicians. She made the keynote speech calling for political attention to the social frameworks which make possible the 'personal and emotional needs of children and of those who have responsibility for them' and called for public attention to be focused upon 'issues of attachments and interdependencies' (Murray, 1995). Professor Murray was the new Bowlby, pressing us to place attachment at the heart of our concerns and policies; the event was a symptom rather than a catalyst<sup>17</sup>. Its tone had been presaged in Leach's book *Children First* (Leach, 1994: 187).<sup>18</sup>

In retrospect the key event, because it indicated how widely prevalent had this discourse become in the public sphere, had been a 1994 conference on 'Family Breakdown and Criminal Activity'. It was mounted by the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) and was seminal for two reasons. First, the IEA was the body which, more than any other, had pioneered the idea of market liberalism through thirty wilderness years until Reagan and Thatcher had seen the light and made it the religion of the polity; it was the representative on earth, one might say, of Mont Pelerin<sup>19</sup>. IEA members boasted at having destroyed the Labour Party by destroying its ideas, and yet at this conference an impassioned speech, *Crime and the Family*, was given by the Labour Party's Home Affairs spokesman, Tony Blair<sup>20</sup>. Three years on he was, as Party Leader and future Prime Minister, to use the rhetoric of family values as a motif in his victorious electoral campaign, rhetoric that he has continued to employ in the years since that election.<sup>21</sup>

## The after effect

Asked in 2002 how they thought the arguments over childcaring had developed since the transmission of 'Holding the Baby' in 1991, 4 respondents<sup>22</sup> replied in very similar terms:

The debate in the UK has today shifted from one of 'children needs their mothers' versus 'childcaring does no harm' to one of 'children need their mothers versus parents need a better work-life balance'. There has been some recognition that full-time childcaring is not the best answer for children and families. Instead of

state funded child care, the academic/policy elite now call for family friendly work policies (eg maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, shorter working hours for parents, better social support services for parents). (O'Neill, 2002)

Angela Phillips is sceptical as to whether the debate has changed. There is an oscillation between positions which goes on regardless of what is actually happening, a constant rhetorical debate but no real change. TV harries government one minute for not providing childcare and then it harries women for wanting to go out to work. It's still very difficult to have a debate about child welfare since any attempt to discuss that will be mistaken for a pretext to bring up whether or not women should work.

However she noted that The government today is wanting to couch childcare strategy in terms of women employment rights but is being advised that it should be couched in terms of the welfare of children. (Phillips, 2002)

Whereas in 1990 advocates for helping mothers stay at home were counter-orthodox, over the following 10 years it became more widely acceptable to argue that mothers should be supported if that was their choice. Very influential was Hakim's *preference theory*, which held that women have a variety of preferences which should be taken into account by policy makers. If anything, this is more the position of the left than the right, as Wilkinson has shown<sup>23</sup> in a *Demos* paper which introduced the 'public health approach to family life' which 'avoids retracing the faultline between liberals and traditionalists' (Wilkinson, 2002). Thus in March 2002 the British Government finally moved in that direction when it improved benefits for mothers rather than investing the money in institutional care.<sup>24</sup>

As to institutional childcaring, rather than the debate focussing on whether childcaring is good or bad for children it focuses rather upon quantity and quality, with general consensus that long periods away from the home for very young children is not beneficial (O'Neill, 2002, Roberts, 2002). This was the theme of 'Holding the Baby', and its incorporation into the mainstream could be taken to signify a victory for a view which, when originally expressed, was marginal.

## Conclusion

What can this tell us about the television documentary which was transmitted at what seems to have been a pivotal moment in the development of the discourses through which it spoke? It is impossible to attribute agency:

Once released into the public sphere, a written or audio-visual text has to compete with other modes of discourse in influencing public opinion, or in shaping social awareness. Far from being able to inject a message into the minds of their readers, listeners or viewers, like some hypodermic syringe of the imaginary, the media have often been used by audience to gratify their own psychic needs and desires. (Porter, 1999: 181).

Porter goes on to demonstrate the difficulties for the media historian in grappling with the public's response to the media, difficulties both evidential and interpretative. These difficulties are real and awareness of them needs colour any conclusions we draw. Nevertheless some useful points can be made. 'Holding the Baby' had a high audience rating for *C4 Dispatches* and attracted much comment, mainly hostile; it continued to be talked about in the TV profession and used as a model (Stott, 1998). The production team at the time thought that it was being very advanced and challenging and creative, while its critics read the programme as reactionary. Within the context of the emerging discourse described above and the subsequent development of programming on this subject, it now seems more realistic to say that the team was responding to the 'corporate expectations' (Cottle, 1995 : 162) of C4 for a certain type of programme as was, with his more strategic antennae, the Commissioning Editor. Both the Commissioning Editor and the documentary team were, in Fiske and Hartley's happy phrase, 'only obeying orders' (Fiske, 1994 : 193).

C4 demands the kind of programme idea that is slightly in advance of cultural change, but only just (or no one will watch it). If it is not in advance, no one will be angry about it, which would be unfortunate for C4 and for its executives' careers<sup>25</sup>. This interpretation of the cultural locus of 'Holding the Baby' and the decision-making associated with it is, I believe, borne out by the subsequent development of the discourse of childcaring.

In 1990 concern about institutional childcaring and a belief in the advantages to young children of staying at home with mother were the preserve almost exclusively of the Christian right, whose influence even within the Conservative Party was reducing as the market liberals gained

sway. It had long been the consensus, not only in left politics, where feminism was more naturally at home, but also among the market liberals, that caring for children was a nuisance that stood in the way of women's ability to take their rightful places in the market. The solutions as to how mothers were to be released for production were of course different, with the left advocating social provision while the right looked to the invisible hand. But the effect would be the same: mother's liberation.

The Channel 4 intervention (large numbers of fact sheets were distributed as a result of the original transmission, which was repeated) polarised people on the issue. Starting in 1991, a new discourse of childcaring began to emerge among polemicists, politicians and psychologists, although C4 can only claim correlation, not cause. The number and subject matter of television documentaries appears to have reflected, and perhaps reinforced, the discourse. Childcaring became a theme in the 1997 British General Election campaign; the rejected 1950s discourse was, bit by bit, returning as conventional wisdom. A representative text of the election year is the BBC documentary *Missing Mum* (1997) which went much further than previous programmes in criticising mothers who go out to work; the (female) production team was accused of being so anxious to make the case against working mothers as to have doctored the evidence in so doing (Biteback, 1997)<sup>26</sup>. Regardless therefore of the reality of the condition of children or their parents, or the truth or otherwise of claims made about them or on their behalf, a revised discourse of childcaring had developed.

Comments about needing to release parents from the burden of their children now sound quaint. Today the debate, much less strident, revolves around how the state can help mothers, and sometimes fathers, choose for themselves how they want to deal with their childcaring. Where the debate is about the effects of childcaring, the focus is less upon its appropriateness but upon the quality and quantity.

'How can the media historian interpret the roles played by the media during a particular historical period?' asked Porter. Modern public knowledge shifts in its extent and nature and according to its modes of circulation; the evidence of response to programmes is confusing and has gaps, the interpretation is even more difficult as the mix of media and the ways

those media are apprehended has changed (Porter, 1999: 182). Despite these caveats the case study appears to demonstrate the truth of Winston's proposition that documentaries are not powerful instigators; 'Their power resides in their ability to amplify' (Winston, 1995: 237). A topic is in the ether, as yet unacknowledged by the media élite; it is taken up by a team of them as a result of a more or less chance encounter with it and, because of the system for exploiting ideas of this kind, is adopted by those (in this case at C4) with the power to amplify it. With this kind of (then) controversial issue C4 was fulfilling its social function. This is a demonstration of the role of the documentary in contributing to opinion formation – more limited than that arrogated to it by the pioneers, yet still significant.

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of this, see Bruzzi (2000)
- 2 The subject listings, *Programme Subject Reports*, states that "The subject listings are not comprehensive but are intended to alert producers and researchers to ideas and subjects which have been covered in a major way". (PSR, 1991: 1) The expression used here, "TV unit", describes a factual programme which may be standalone or part of a series or strand and is of thirty minutes duration or more; descriptions, and thus classifications, are not very precise. [classification units: childcaring, family, child abuse; divorce, mothers, fathers, children?' lives, bad boys]
- 3 For example, in 1994 there were 27 units on "The family" of which by far the majority dealt with negative aspects of marriage; 8 units on children's lives and 8 units on women. There were 9 units on prostitutes, while 29 units provided sex facts.
- 4 The process described in the following paragraphs was first written up by me in Chapter 12 'Scrutinising Social Policy: Channel 4 Dispatches' in de Burgh (2000)
- 5 Channel 4 Television (C4) is a national, commercial station set up in 1982 with a public remit to represent minorities and to provide programming distinct from either BBC or commercial TV, although there were limitations to that distinctness (Hartley, 1992: 67). The image of a channel which takes risks, champions the underrepresented and asks the questions that have not been asked has been useful to invoke in marketing (McNulty, 1996: 19). The C4 viewer is positioned as being educated, wealthy and liberal enough to cope with 'stimulating' programming (Barron, 2002). *Dispatches*, inaugurated in 1986, has been considered to be the 'flagship' strand of C4 TV, to produce for which is a badge of honour. Over 400 *Dispatches* have been transmitted since November 1987 and the variety of stories and treatments is widely believed to have been greater than for any other series or strand in the same period. When started it was unique in being the only factual series with each programme commissioned from a different independent producer.
- 6 Since the classic studies of British documentary producers such as Elliott (1972) and Silverstone (1985) there have been many changes in the ways in which producers operate. The Channel 4 model of commissioning independents rather than making its

- own programmes is the dominant one; yet the sense of élitism among the, now increasingly independent, producers is scarcely less than when they were employed in the 'public service'. They are, though, subject to all the pressures of the freelance plus those of competing in an astoundingly competitive market. One indication of just how competitive it is the statement by the then Commissioning Editor for C4 *Dispatches* that she has at times received thirty times as many proposals as she has slots (Byrne, 2001).
- 7 In a lecture in 1998 he compared other programmes on the same subject with *Holding the Baby* and asserted that it was superior because of its use of that evidence. (David Lloyd to the students of the MA *Investigative Journalism*, 19 Feb 1998 at Nottingham Trent University).
- 8 It should not be ignored that, once commissioned, the documentary would provide 8 weeks work for that team at good rates of pay. In addition, the project as a whole would be expected to make a profit of around £50,000 from a total budget of £120,000. There is therefore an incentive to provide what the Commissioning Editor wants.
- 9 This was partly on account of their own behaviour in refusing to answer questions directly, and partly because of the way their interviews were cut. On the ethics of being not completely candid with interviewees, see Rosenthal (1980: 74). Codes of practice have now rendered this kind of behaviour all but impossible. (deBurgh, 2000a)
- 10 For much of recent history 'family', 'marriage' and 'childcare' have been constructed as interchangeable Bourdieu (1996). The history of these concepts is addressed in, inter alia, Mount (1983), Parsons (1995), Keating (1991: 303-5), Berger (1983: 16-19), Davin *Imperialism and Motherhood*, Dwork (1987), Finch (1993: 106), Miller (1994: 114), Rose (1989, ch 2 & 11), Rose (1987: 73), Field (1982, 1996), Abbott (1992: 28), Bowlby (1953), Oakley (1990: 208), Hayes (1994: 682-725), Walkerdine (1993: 453).
- 11 On the claims of the Engels School that the nuclear family, couple love and parental bonding were recent inventions see Mount (1983:54), Shipman (1997). For a discussion of this and of the effect of Leroy Labourie? *Montaillou* in discrediting Ariès' work, see Shipman M. (1997) *The Limitations of Social Research*. London : Longman
- 12 The cluster of associated ideas was termed generally *therapeutic familism*, of which one key ingredient was the belief in the mother-newborn bond and early attachment as prime determinant of a human being's later life. It was considered that everything which privileges this fundamental bond and contributes to its success is as important for society as for the individual. The influence of Bowlby and his colleague Winnicott was felt throughout the growing professions of social welfare, marriage guidance, community work and education, through which the professionals were able to promote approved models of behaviour or identities; therapy was introduced for people who couldn't cope with these requirements and the conflicts they brought about. Donzelot noted similar developments in France (Donzelot, 1979: 47).
- 13 See Green, David (1987) *The New Right Brighton: Wheatsheaf*.
- 14 The 'collective processes' (Donzelot) involved the media too: In 1953 the BBC made and transmitted programmes which reflected the same discourse, reaffirming it after the disruption to family life brought about by WW2, with its series 'The Pattern of Marriage'. In the synopsis of her study of that series, Booth says: 'It was based on the notion of the family as the basic unit of social organisation, and it attempted to construct its family audience as a secure unit which, although not without its internal difficulties, must be upheld...The BBC felt a duty to re-establish the "happy family" as a norm ....'(Booth 1980:15)
- 15 Other interpretations of soap operas are discussed in Chambers (2000 : 12, 14-

- 17). Interestingly, Harwood (1997) in her *Family Fictions*, argues that Hollywood cinema by contrast continued to uphold the ideal representation of the nuclear family regardless of the challenges that the icon faced in the 'real' world.
- 16 Then at Cambridge, now Professor of Psychology and Head of the Winnicott Research Centre at the University of Reading (2002).
- 17 As Vicki Bell has shown (Bell, 1993) there has been a move towards treating children as autonomous individuals since the Gillick decision and its incorporation into the 1989 Children Act which "might be seen...to remove any remaining trace of the classical liberal concept of a *parent right* to govern one's own children".
- 18 Penelope Leach, popular author and one of the most widely read of all members of the psy professions (holds or has held leading positions in the professional bodies, is an assessor for ESRC), sees this less as a limitation of children's rights than an extension of parental and social duties as the quotation demonstrates.
- 19 The story of how the IEA 'turned' would itself make a study. That conference and the flood of books on welfare were the work of two researchers, David Green and Robert Whelan, who in effect took over the IEA from within.
- 20 Other speakers in St Ermin's Hotel on 24/5/94 included Patricia Morgan who, since her book *Farewell to the Family*, in 1995, had become the main advocate of radical rethinking of family policies (the same Morgan who said rather different things in 1975, quoted above); John Redwood, a Conservative leadership contender and proudly 'right wing'; the Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and Norman Dennis, main proponent of the thesis that society collapses if boys don't have traditional nuclear families. A new consensus had emerged.
- 21 How Blair has kept going on this topic, in both rhetoric and policy, is discussed in Chambers (2000 : 10-11). See also Wilkinson (2002: 114).
- 22 Professor Robert Rowthorn, Head of the Family and Fiscal Policy Project at Cambridge University and a much published author on marriage and on family economics, Ceridwen Roberts, recent Director of the Family Policy Studies Centre, Angela Phillips, Editor, *The Guardian Women Page* and Rebecca O'Neill of the Family Education Trust.
- 23 The article cited expresses the 'Third Way' rather clearly. However, Wilkinson also could write throwback articles such as 'The mother load' in which she campaigned on behalf of commercial childcare companies receiving subsidies, an article which ignored the interests of people and exalted those of business. Curious. See *The Guardian* 26/3/02
- 24 Taking the oft propounded advice of demographer David Coleman, eg 'Look after mothers and the birth rate will stop dwindling' in *Daily Telegraph* 8/8/01
- 25 see McNulty, M (1996) " Dispatches Rider" in *Broadcast* 18/10/96 and Methven N (1996) 'Inside Dispatches' in *Press Gazette* 18/10/96
- 26 Nannies from Hell was in the same vein, suggesting that mothers who handed over care of their children to others were subjecting them to abuse. It is inconceivable that this programme could have been transmitted before 1990.

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