

# YouTube's Kids: The Political Economy of Child-Created Content

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The profitability of content created for and by children on social media platforms such as YouTube has sparked an entire sector of content catering to young children. The panel looks at the cultivation of child “influencers” as a part of the emergent digital media landscape and children’s media industries, including the emergence of entire genres such as “unboxing.” Unboxing refers to videos that show people (or just hands) opening and commenting on toys and candies in the vein of a product review. Increasingly, unboxing videos lack any critical review function and instead show very young children or adults playing with the toys themselves. This acts as a simulation of how play could or should be modeled for younger viewers within the apps.

These genres reinforce a capitalist logic of consumption articulated through the viewing of other children and families immersed in toys, games, and product placement. Through these videos of consumption, the mobile phone and app technologies are the space of “sharenting” defined as “sharing representations of one’s parenting or children online” (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017). The entire family is wrapped in the production of these unboxing videos. This perpetuates a media environment targeted at children, where consumption is idealized and families are projected as constantly having an abundance of free products from their digital ‘labor.’ Social media influencers are enabled to quit their “regular” jobs and begin to fully rely on apps and social media accounts for their livelihood. Users compete for unique content and followers with the goal to receive paid partnerships. They manufacture this digital persona of posting approachable pictures and interacting with their fans, making it appear like they are carefree, without ever showing the audience the hard laborious work that happens behind the scenes. No worries, no family drama, and always already fun activities no matter where they are—a ‘perfect’ social media life, no filter. The expertise and trust that is generated by the endorser has altered much of the modern consumer society, growing the perceived power of the influencer and the consumer’s brand attitudes. In turn, the relationship and proximity of children to unfiltered advertising has shrunk.

In addition to social media channels and platforms like “YouTube Kids,” digital streaming companies like Netflix and Amazon have invested heavily in producing targeted content. Corporations have always viewed children as a target demographic, but with the success of child-created content large companies are also investing heavily in marketing and content through mobile phones and connected viewing practices. This panel aims to provide a broad overview and mapping of the current landscape of children’s entertainment and media, including the rise of very young children as an expressed target demographic, in an attempt to articulate the future of media authorship, labor, and consumption. Attention is paid to the political economy implications of a children’s media industry as well as the critical and social influences on

conceptions of aspirational purchasing and marketing melding with the affordances of digital technology and platform design. “Part of the work the YouTube Kids app performs is to corral young children into a controlled space without unexpected participation and play, where a more monolithic category of “child” or “kid” viewership can be codified and marketed to within the constraints of the app” (Burroughs, 2017). Child-created content is also the site for discursively codifying particular articulations of concepts such as family or gender to reinforce purchasing and marketing norms within these sites.

## References

Alicia Blum-Ross & Sonia Livingstone (2017) “Sharenting,” parent blogging, and the boundaries of the digital self, *Popular Communication*, 15:2, 110-125, DOI: [10.1080/15405702.2016.1223300](https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2016.1223300)

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