

The major difference between active audience



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The debate between “ active audience” and “ vulnerable viewer” traditions has been sustained for a quite long period because each of the side examines the relationship between people and message respectively, which seem to be in contrary. Australian policy on video games is a vivid example, which presents how the OFLC balance between these two contradictory interests groups in order to set a guideline for the video game players.

It has always been understood that the policy making was largely influenced by “ public interest”, in this case, protecting vulnerable viewers.

Nevertheless, this essay is attempted to present the key differences between “ active audience” and “ vulnerable viewer” tradition by revealing that the policy making procedure on video game regulation did not only rely on the “ vulnerable viewer tradition”, but instead, in an attempt to balance between them to perfect guideline. key differences are presented first followed by examining the problems within each side.

Finally, the video game regulation will be used to illustrate how these problems are partly overcome by OFLC (Office of Film and Literature Classification) which is the only institution that mainly decide on making video game regulation. Body: One of key differences between active audience and vulnerable viewer is concerned with the question of how media affect people, in a direct way, or opposite way? In here, the “ direct effect” is referring to the idea that people are effected by media, which is a major concern from a large group of community members and is in favour of “ Vulnerable viewer tradition” supporters.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, active audience tradition has carried out totally opposite response by stating that media affect people in an opposite way that is people give media meaning. "Vulnerable viewer tradition" is mostly concerned with the content being promoted in the video games, whether video game players are exposure to excessive aggressive, violent or sexual content, which might result in several negative outcomes. One of consequences could be the inclination to the decline in morality - desensitisation.

A number of studies in regards of this particular negative effect were undertaken recently. Some of the results have shown that playing violent video games can increase aggressive behaviour. This is an assumption that gains massive supports from a large group of scientists who are inclined to the "vulnerable viewer perspective", such as Dr Craig Anderson - a psychologist at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His finding focuses on examining two of the most popular video games that is currently available in US market - "Doom" and "Mortal Kombat"(Ko: 2000; 47).

Recent study which focuses on the brain controlling aspect of video games player have also made its attempt to prove that repeated exposure to violent images is desensitising, which Kansas State's Murray defines as having the effect of rendering a person "less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, and more willing to tolerate ever-increasing levels of violence in our society"(Keegan: 1999; 46). A "monkey seeing monkey do" phenomenon is another worry that has been raised in "vulnerable viewer perspective".

In general, this possible outcome is associated with the likelihood that video games players may imitate the action that has been displayed within the game content. Car racing game is a predominant example that attracted massive attention from the society because driving car is a daily activity, which involves high risk if driver's good manner is absent. A psychologist at the University of Hawaii and an expert on driver psychology and road rage - Leon James insists that theoretically people who play video games are more likely to repeat violent action in driving (Oldenburg: 2000).

On the other hand, "active audience perspective" argues that people give media meaning, in other words, people decides how media effect them depending on how they understand the message being sent out to them from the media. Contrary to the "vulnerable viewers perspective", supporters of "active audience perspective" agreed, "we choose media that reflect our values, tastes, interests and emotional need than behaviours and actions and beliefs"(Oldenburg: 2000). Nevertheless, there are problematic areas in both of the tradition.

Firstly, the evidence in "vulnerable viewer tradition" cannot be account as an accurate and ultimate result due to the fact that there is not yet direct proof of cause and effect about the assumption that violent video games lead to desensitisation. Despite recent studies that have provided certain amount of evidence revealing this cause and effect relationship, these studies were conducted under limitation. For instance, Dr Anderson's study only embraced 225 college students aged between 18 to 25, which can be seem as a very confined group of players because game players aged between 5 to 18 remains a large proportion as well.

In order to avoid the lack of narrowing and confining scientific research, the pre-regulation research project “ Computer Games and Australian Today” is consisted of three parts: overview of the market and products; investigation in exploring the attractions of the games and player’s views about the content; study of contemporary Australian uses of and attitudes towards computer games (OFLC Executive Summary: 1999). This nationwide survey, which involves both industry professions and ordinary young and adult game players, is in an attempt to balance the overestimated negative effect that concerns the “ vulnerable viewer tradition”.

Secondly, “ active audience tradition” allows large degree of freedom by leaving to the trust to the game players themselves, which to certain extent constructs a strong belief in players’ self conduct. This is not a very comprehensive understanding of the effect of media over people. Therefore, by establishing a “ National Classification Code”, government has put a detailed classification: G (8+); M (15+); MA (15+) (OFLC Guidelines: 1999). It can be seen that the level of restriction to certain content varies over different age groups because the OFLC acknowledges the danger in trusting “ self-conduct” of the game players.

OFLC maximises the exercise of its power by constructing strict classification; extensive enforcement over states and strong penalty because the ground of the regulation is that “ everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive”(OFLC Guidelines: 1999). In sum, the question of how people perceives message from media explicitly distinguishes “ vulnerable viewer tradition” and “ active viewer tradition”. It is still difficult to determine which side is correct.

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However, it is not hard to draw an ultimate point by combining interests from both sides – that to certain extent, media is persuasive, but the degree how powerful media to each individual is unknown and indeterminable as it varies across age, class and gender barrier in unpredictable ways. Thus the OFLC is aiming regulation is aiming develop from this point and extend it by input more research and investigation to gain comprehensive information.

In conclusion, the analysis of video game regulation illustrates the fact that government itself is not a unified entity. But its attempt to balance the interests between competing groups, in this case, “ active audience” and “ vulnerable viewers” traditions, demonstrates its effect of unifying different government agencies. Although it cannot be assume that the government in fact achieved this goal on video game regulation, it is still obvious that the government is in its attempt to perfect video game policy in terms of protecting and benefit citizens.