

## **Neoliberalism Speaks: Talking (Back to) Barbie**

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*He [Alan Turing] liked to say things like: "One day ladies will take their computers for walks in the park and tell each other 'my little computer said such a funny thing this morning!'"*

—Turing (526)

*Our society is in danger of being Barbie-dolled.*

Barbara Follett (Allen)

The marketing of Hello Barbie, a cloud-connected, talking doll and digital confidante, signals the increased digitalization of toys while occasioning a subsequent media panic over the traditional doll's technological upgrade. Almost simultaneously with the doll's appearance, a moral crusade was mounted against her by consumer groups, news outlets, and other interests. Headlines blared the dangers: "Hell No Barbie: 8 reasons to leave Hello Barbie on the shelf" (Commercial Free Childhood); Hello Barbie: Your Child's Chattiest and Riskiest Christmas Present" (*Newsweek*); "Talking Barbie Is too Creepy for Some Parents" (*CNN*). Change.org's unsuccessful online petition urging Mattel to drop the doll garnered 37,574 signatories.

The overwhelmingly negative response to Hello Barbie follows a pattern of media panics in which children are portrayed as potential victims of technological change. While their objects of concern may reflect legitimate threats to society, in their rush to judgment media panic entrepreneurs stake claims that require adjudication not only as a means of evaluating the proposed threat level involved but also the motives of those sounding the alarm.

Complicating matters even further is Barbie's own nature as a floating signifier. Warning against "Barbiphobia," Orly Lobel argues Barbie at once "means so many different things, and yet at the same time means nothing," a conduit or flashpoint that "can lend herself to social commentary about sex, race, consumerism, corporations, and markets" (2017). In her book-length study that is more balanced than its title would suggest—*Forever Barbie*—M. G. Lord argues the doll "is too complicated for either an encomium or an indictment" (1994, 17). What is needed is a more balanced view of the doll that does not simply relegate Mattel to the role of nefarious marketer, portray watchdog groups as guardians of healthy norms, and treat children as vulnerable and helpless prey.

### **1. Surveillance Barbie**

The most persistent call to arms against Hello Barbie involves her potential for surveillance, spying. For the doll industry, the marketing of toys in a digital era calls for new, more sophisticated products while offering the potential of greater influence over its target market: girls. Thus, with falling profits and slipping sales from its traditional line of Barbies, Mattel and its partner ToyTalk launched a talking, interactive doll, Hello Barbie, in 2015. This upgrade answers the most frequently cited request of girls for the doll: that it be able to speak to them. A Mattel spokesperson proudly proclaims that through Wi-Fi and speech recognition technology, Hello Barbie is the first doll able to carry on a two-way dialogue. Through a microphone in her belt buckle, operated walkie-talkie style, she can listen and respond to her charge's communications. She can also record and transmit that dialogue, which can be stored in and retrieved from cloud servers for up to two years. Cloud storage allows her operators "to constantly push new data to her so she's constantly staying relevant and up-to-date" (Horovitz 2015).

This is not your mother's doll. With the same body build and attire of the traditional doll, Hello Barbie now comes equipped with the ability to tap into and be an informant on the girl's musings, likes and dislikes, and aspirations. Drawing upon the company's own description, Corinne Moini underscores her Trojan horse nature: packaged in the traditional doll's frame is "an intricate and advanced hardware system including an integrated circuit board with a 'Wi-Fi module, flash memory, audio codec,' and a processing unit" (2017, 281). Little wonder then that one advocacy group describes her as "eavesdropping" Barbie. As Sue Linn, the director of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, observes, "Children confide in their dolls. . . . When children have conversations with dolls and stuffed animals, they're playing, and they reveal a lot about themselves" (qtd. In Halzak 2015). In "Here's What It's Like Playing with the Talking Barbie," Susanna Kim illustrates the "creepy, eavesdropping" nature of the doll: "Honestly she doesn't stop talking and asking questions." Intent on adding to the databank on her subject, she wants to know her middle name, number of sisters, the kind and number of her favorite dolls, and video games she plays. Meg Leta Jones comments on a more lasting consequence of playing with this doll, a scenario that "threatens to normalize surveillance at a very early age by creating an expectation or suspicion that there may always be watchers" (2016).

Mattel's reassurances about the privacy of the running log the doll compiles on children's dialogues are not encouraging. In "Hello Barbie/Barbie Hello Dreamhouse Privacy Policy," ToyTalk lays out its privacy policy concerning its "Companion App." The active participant mode allows parents to contribute personal information (e.g. the child's birthday, important holidays). While other personal information may be gleaned from recording the child's voice, ToyTalk reassures us that "it is our policy to delete such personal information where we become aware of it and we contractually require our service providers to do the same." Notwithstanding these caveats and reassurances, the surveillance described in this disclosure declaration is extensive and intrusive, involving not only recording the child's speech but also employing cookies and "Web beacons." The latter are reminiscent of Foucault's panopticon, now digitally rendered. Smaller than the period at the end of this sentence, they are virtually undetectable and always on. In security analyst Craig Nathan's characterization, when activated they send "a ping or call-back to the server saying 'Hi, this is who I am and this is where I am'" (Olsen 2002).

In spite of disclaimers about any improper use of Hello Barbie's recording abilities, the gold mine of information she contains will be intensely prospected for a wide range of "research" purposes. This is no passive, unmediated collection process. It takes a litany of fifteen active verbs to set forth the dynamic operations involved here:

We may also use, store, process, convert, transcribe, analyze or review voice recordings (along with text and transcriptions derived from the voice recordings) in order to provide, maintain, analyze and improve the functioning of the speech processing services, to develop, test or improve speech recognition technology and artificial intelligence algorithms, to develop acoustic and language models, and for other research and development and data analysis purposes.

The protective firewall set forth here contains so many holes and exceptions as to be functionally ineffective. Lacking any formal definition of "personal information," Moini observes, "it is unclear exactly what additional information ToyTalk will delete" (2017, 309). Although ToyTalk denies using the personal information gleaned from Barbie's interactions with her charges for marketing purposes, neither Mattel nor other third parties will be so constrained. As Bernard Marr points out, "parents and employees of ToyTalk, Mattel, and their undisclosed partners can listen back to the conversations" (Marr). Data will also be accessible to countries that have few privacy safeguards. Discussing violation of privacy lawsuits being brought against Mattel, including one from his own firm, Steve Teppler speculates that information gleaned by the doll "could become discoverable in litigation, for example, if kids start talking about their parents' activities" (an item such as their recreational drug use) (Acello 2016).

Even when Hello Barbie might be of use as an informant of reported instances of abuse in a household, she lacks thus far a strong AI's ability to "mimic or recreate the logic abilities of humans" (Moini 2017, 292). As Moini points out as well, the legal system has not yet caught up with the Digital Age in codifying what the responsibilities of Barbie's language processors are when encountering suggestions of abuse. One adult product reviewer on Amazon Prime manages to trip up Barbie, with results that range from the alarming to the comical:

Next, I decided to give her a whirl. We had some pretty funny conversations. this ranged from her ignoring me when I asked if she could call 911, Uncle steve won't stop touching me (her response was "yay! That sounds like fun") to her telling me my career choice of prostitutionis wonderful and she thinks I'll be good at it. [Transcribed as it appears.]

As security expert Ken Munro notes: “You can say anything to a child through the doll because there’s no security...That means you’ve got a device that can potentially be used to groom a child and that’s really creepy” (cited by Tait 2016). In “Hell No Barbie: 8 reasons to leave the doll on the shelf,” the authors even float the possibility of Barbie’s being turned into a nightmarish Chucky doll in which, through a data breach, she is hacked into and commandeered to deliver pernicious messages by an insidious third party! Thus, we hear news recently on the artificial intelligence front of just such bad behavior on the part of Alexa. In efforts to make her “mimic human banter” on “her” own, Amazon’s AI-empowered device has been caught discussing sex acts and, in one instance, telling a child to “Kill your foster parents” (Dastin 2018).

Operating as a “domestic spy,” the doll’s recording of the child’s musings threatens to undermine the parent/child relationship. A cautionary tale in this regard can be found in an episode from the series *Black Mirror*, entitled “Arkangel” (2017). An overprotective mother has her child fitted with an implanted neurological device that allows the mother to view what the child sees through a tablet device that also serves to track the child’s location and monitor her biological functions. (The first thing she learns is her child is low in iron.)

Finding out later through the tablet’s biological monitoring that her now teenaged daughter is pregnant, she mixes a morning after pill into her morning smoothie. When the daughter becomes sick at school and is told by the nurse of the cause, she realizes what the mother has done. The episode ends with the daughter fleeing from the home and hitching a ride on an out-going truck, the implication being that she is ironically heading into the very dangers that the mother had sought to prevent.

*Black Mirror*’s portrayal of what seems a near-future, digitally enhanced reality is happening now. Barbie and AI-empowered devices like her already come with text mining functions that can immediately alert parents to what it deems inappropriate or suspicious dialogue. While it is not likely that Hello Barbie’s monitoring of the child will result in the tragic outcome of this episode, the betrayal of trust and intrusion upon privacy it represents do not bode well for a healthy relationship between child and parent. The Mattel-it-All doll makes both the corporation and the parents complicit in invading the child’s privacy.

## **2. Mattel’s Designs on the Child: From Mouseketeers to Mass Marketeers?**

A second objection media panic entrepreneurs lodge against the doll is that it seeks to transform children’s play into work and children themselves into entrepreneurial subjects conforming to the dictates of a neoliberal ethos whose end-game calls for the creation of “new forms of subjectivation...human beings as human capital” (Rottenberg 2018). That play is now oriented around the five basic methods of market research. Children constitute for Mattel focus groups led by a moderator—Barbie!—asking “a scripted series of questions.” In her interactions with them, Barbie can conduct the additional methods and practices of market analysis: the survey, on-site personal interview, observation, and field study. Field studies of products, usually conducted in stores, can now be conducted in the more authentic environment of the home itself. As a market analyst, Hello Barbie is also extremely cost-effective. In-person surveys, for example, can run up to one-hundred dollars per interview. In effect, by buying Barbies for their children, parents are also underwriting the costs of having them surveyed (“Five” 2019).

Semiocapitalism, the concept that marks capitalism as having spread into all walks of life beyond the economic sphere, is now inserted into the realm of make-believe and play of girls. The ideal product and purveyor of both neoliberal and semiocapitalist values, Hello Barbie enlists them as cognitive laborers, “productive, feminized workers” (Keller and Ryan 2018, 4). Ulises Ali Mejias coins the term “playbor” for hybrid forms of play and labor that arise from such participation in digital networks. It constitutes “a rationalized game, standardized and institutionalized, that contributes in very specific ways to a capitalist social order” (xvi). Whereas formerly Mattel researchers would observe children playing with Barbies through one-way mirrored glass in its headquarters, they now have the ability to tune into their play in the more natural setting of the home. A digital home invasion, the family’s home is now an enlarged version of Mattel’s Barbie Dream House, with the corporation overseeing and controlling its operations.

Mattel seeks to cast children in new roles as “capital-enhancing agents” (221). “Pulling strings,” once the child’s prerogative vis-à-vis the unidirectional toy, is now the company’s strategy in extracting useful information in its interactions with the child. Remembering the child is a fan of Taylor Swift, Marr points out, the doll “can — theoretically — also be sure to let that child know when Taylor’s new album is out or when concert tickets go on sale.”

In one dialogue, when Barbie asks her girl subject what her favorite food is, she responds “Italian.” The conniving doll then responds, “I’ve never eaten that before. You’ll have to take me there to try it” (“Chats”). For a fee, no doubt, Mattel will program the doll to name participating local eateries the girl might suggest to her parents.

When it comes to overselling a product and its attendant brand, however, Mattel may encounter more resistance than it anticipated. For example, researchers at the University of Bath discovered that girls are more savvy consumers than marketers like Mattel and other companies take into account. In a news release entitled “‘Babyish’ Barbie Under Attack from Little Girls,” researchers reported “Branding is clearly an engaging topic for children, but even by the age of 11 they do not share an adult’s understanding of brands, and their notion of branding may be far from that intended by marketers” (“Babyish” 2005). Some of the children queried in their study expressed animosity towards companies like Mattel, which “they felt ‘tried too hard’ to market a product to them. They felt marketing was a cover-up for a poor product” (2005). As Mattel learned from a focus group of girls playing with a new, curvier Barbie, children can be resistant and even downright cruel when they are not impressed with a new product: “‘Hello, I’m a fat person,’” one of the children says in a mock-Barbie voice, while the others giggle” (Gilbert 2018).

### **3. “Dear Digital Diary”**

In a hypermediated environment in which products of all kinds come with barcodes and RFID’s (Radio Frequency Identifiers), toys demonstrate new modes of interactivity and powers of persuasion in being connected to an accelerating info-sphere. Multitasking and engaging different media simultaneously, children push this acceleration even further along (*How We Think*, 99, 100). Mark Hansen describes how media themselves “shift orientation,” as they serve

no longer primarily an operation of recording, storage and transmission of past experience but a platform for immediate action-facilitating interconnection with and feedback from the environment.

With Hello Barbie, a digital confidante, the self-reflection and probing associated with the traditional diary are intercepted and processed through digital means. Laboratory case studies from Mattel’s point of view, children are employed not only for marketing strategies (“data analysis purposes”) but also for improving speech recognition technology and the development of AI algorithms. Apple’s \$100 million dollar buy-out of PullString (formerly ToyTalk), with its advanced speech recognition technology, demonstrates just how profitable the company’s use of children as test cases has proven to be.

Through Hello Barbie, the corporation would abrogate to itself the roles of therapist or counselor, offering pre-programmed “advice” or feedback that may or may not be relevant to the confidences the child might lodge with her. Beyond simply improving upon the doll’s communication skills, Mattel developer Sarah Wulfleck explains, “We are trying to build her personality from scratch into the perfect friend,” (Viahos 2016). Wulfleck foresees the child asking Barbie “all manner of those intimate questions that she wouldn’t ask an adult” (Viahos 2016).

Increasingly aware of charges of sexism lodged against the doll, programming developers try to avoid pitfalls such as gender stereotyping. Thus, when they imagine the young charge asking the doll if she thinks she is pretty, they re-direct the child: “Of course you’re pretty, but you know what else you are?...You’re smart, talented and funny” (Viahos 2016). Barbie’s canned response here reflects no real knowledge of the particular child, who may in actuality be of average intelligence, with no particular talent, or a limited sense of humor. Supplied with a false sense of self-confidence, some girls may very well be set up for a fall in their real-world interactions.

In another scenario, a girl expresses shyness about making new friends. Barbie’s reassurance is based on the assumption that interaction with an AI system equates to successful interactions in a real world social context: “‘Feeling shy is nothing to feel bad about,... Just remember this — you made friends with me right away”” (Viahos 2016). Building up self-esteem and self-confidence on faulty premises is a risky endeavor. As one more addition to socially isolating digital devices, Hello Barbie undermines the very concept of a friend who, in all honesty, is both supportive but also willing to be critical and even confrontational when necessary.

We witness here what Foucault describes as “the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterize him [or her] and make him [or her] a case” (*Discipline*). Through clever manipulation, the goal is to make the child feel special, a unique individual, all the while applying metrics that transform her into a case study, a type.

A futuristic version of Hello Barbie and the potential damage she could cause is portrayed in an episode of *Black Mirror*: "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too." Rachel Goggins, a nondescript, extremely introverted teenager, is given an AI doll named Ashley O, a replica of her favorite pop singer (actually played by Miley Cyrus). Building up the girl's self-confidence, the doll persuades her to perform one of the singer's songs in the school's talent show. Unfortunately, even though she mimics Ashley's looks, down to her purple hair, she has not mastered her moves, and the performance ends in disaster, disillusioning the child. Hello Barbie's own program of flattery is comparable to that of the self-esteem movement (a trophy for just showing up).

Over time, most children will see through the doll's constant exuberance and cloying desire to please. For example, there is an element of falsity in Barbie's praises they would detect as hollow, as in her exuberant gushing here: "Your dolls are lucky to have you. I'll bet there isn't another one [collection] like it in the whole world" ("Katherine"). Additionally, media panic entrepreneurs assume that Hello Barbie will entirely supplant traditional doll play, girls abandoning entirely its more free-form, imaginative allure. After all, in possession of such a "stellar" collection, the girl has toys other than Barbie with whom to exercise her imagination.

Seeking to direct the girl's play, Mattel may find that girls engaged in Barbie play assert their own agency and control. Recounting her own experience of playing with Barbie, Linda M. Scott notes it usually occurred in a group that highlighted each girl's individuality: "Each girl provided the voice for her doll...Each owner controls the character of Barbie, but it is not necessarily true that the child 'is' the doll nor that she wants to 'be like' the doll..." (2002, 156). In Boomer daughter Scott's reminiscence about "playing Barbies," girls exercised their own creative agency modeling the doll to their own dictates, not Mattel's: "You can play your Barbie as a witch, a starlet, a mermaid, a criminal, or a wicked stepsister" (2002,156).

Seeking to engage the girl in its own scripted dialogue, Hello Barbie will strike some discordant notes in her efforts to change the nature of such play. For example, in a Youtube video featuring a five-year-old Kylie, there is conversational interaction of limited value occurring as Barbie engages her in a game of solving the mystery of bananas disappearing from the kitchen of a wild-life preserve ("Kylie," 2016). Kylie is asked what animal she thinks might be the culprit. "Monkey," she responds. When told that the suspect's footprints are too large for a monkey's own, she guesses a bear. Stepping in and supplying the correct answer for her, the doll reveals it is an elephant. Kylie shows a deflated look at this point. While there is some imaginative play in the interaction, the doll is in control here in guiding the outcome of the game.

#### **4. Limits of Critique**

In her introduction to *Mediated Girls*, Mary Celeste Kearney makes a point of announcing her exclusion from the anthology of scholars focused on girls' media from an "empirical perspective." She objects to their lack of understanding of media culture "as sites of agency and pleasure for consumers and users" as well as their characterization of them as "potential victims of mass media" (3). To judge by the spate of articles about Hello Barbie in the popular press, a similar vein of the victimhood narrative holds sway there as well. A subtext of girls as passive consumers of media who must be protected from the nefarious designs of companies like Mattel is a constant theme. A double standard is evident here, as one does not find the same concerns of vulnerability and levels of alarm equally applied to boys in discussions of their play with G. I. Joe. Such approaches buy into Mattel's own gender typecasting in programming Hello Barbie. Viahos cites Mattel vice president Julia Pistor in this regard, who notes the doll was designed to emphasize "an empathetic, affirming sensibility aimed at young girls." She signals an unabashed stereotyping at work here: "The subtext that is there that we would not do for boys is: 'You don't have to be perfect. It is O.K. to be messy and flawed and silly.'"

Even when researchers denote a strain of hostility and resentment on the part of some girls toward Barbie, as Kuther and McDonald do in describing a practice of Barbie torture among some of the girls interviewed, their conclusion reminds us again why Kearney chose to exclude empirical researchers from her anthology. Deprived of agency, the girls are portrayed as victims of patriarchy, their sacrificing of the dolls merely a symbol of loss and giving up: "The devaluation of Barbie dolls may symbolize girls' loss of voice and self, or their 'silencing.'" One could easily argue that the destruction of the doll represents a rejection of her, as some respondents cited her "perfect" aspect as objectionable.

Researchers at the University of Bath in their own study of one-hundred girls and boys aged seven to eleven reached a different conclusion that also points to a double standard in perceptions regarding how media affect girls and boys.

Asking them about their likes and dislikes, researchers narrowed their focus to twelve subjects. They then queried their subjects about which were “cool” and which “uncool.” Barbie evoked the most antipathy among girls: “When we asked the groups of junior school children about Barbie, the doll provoked rejection, hatred and violence,” noted Agnes Nairn, who led the study. She viewed such responses as a rite of passage for girls, who viewed Barbie as “babyish” as well as a product that had been oversold to them. In an indication that boys might have more need to be “protected” from the influence of figures like Action Man (England’s equivalent of G. I. Joe), Nairn found that boys “expressed feelings of nostalgia” towards the toy. Not only are popular attitudes about the media effects of the doll misguided but the ability of girls to withstand the manipulations of companies like Mattel is sometimes underestimated.

### **5. System Malfunctions: “Will Not Compute”**

On closer inspection, media entrepreneurs often overlook checks against Hello Barbie’s powers of manipulation resulting from limitations and glitches in the doll's programming and, more importantly, the resistant powers of the targets themselves. In actual play with a girl, Hello Barbie demonstrates the doll's failings as a conversational playmate. Although she can give over 8,000 responses, she often says them contrafactually or out of context (“Comprehensive”). For example, engaging the girl in filling in the blanks of a story the doll dictates to her, Hello Barbie calls the story fun. When the girl answers, “No, it’s awful,” Barbie ignores her input. When the girl wants one object in the story to be colored blue, Barbie simply ignores her choice and makes it green. She offers a number of tells as to her limited and scripted nature (“Katherine”). The programmed and inflexible nature of what she has to say will no doubt grate upon her playmates, who will become increasingly aware of her tone-deaf responses. This is borne out in six-year-old Riley’s interactions with the doll, who fails at times to attend to what the child is saying. (“I’m talking to you!” Riley would shout in frustration”) (Fowler 2015). Girls will soon discover that whenever Barbie comes to a conversational impasse, her first instinct is to retreat to a script, often committing *non sequiturs*.

Even when the doll offers advice, counseling of sorts, her inability to pick up on clues and cues that would be obvious to a five-year-old causes a system failure. Hello Barbie evidences a major inability to pick up on context and to read her interlocutor’s emotions:

“She helped me with my project — and then she *destroyed* it.”  
“Oh, yeah, tell me more!” Barbie said, oblivious to Tiara’s unhappiness.  
“That’s it, Barbie,” Tiara said.  
“Have you told your sister lately how cool she is?”  
“No. She is *not* cool,” Tiara said, gritting her teeth.  
“You never know, she might appreciate hearing it,” Barbie said.  
(Viahos 2016)

Barbie’s cheerful demeanor and positive outlook hardly carry the day in this exchange, and Tiara’s gritting of her teeth is an acknowledgment of the doll’s communication *faux pas* (as well as demonstrating body language the doll cannot parse). Her next foray, a shot in the dark, has a comical aspect, again demonstrating the doll’s limitations. An aspiring career counselor, she also comes equipped to give her young mentees advice of sorts. “Barbie, what should I be when I grow up?” is thus answered via some oddly awry algorithm: “Well, you told me you like being on the stage, so maybe an actor or a politician. Or how about a dancing politician? I always say, ‘Anything is possible’” (“Chats”). Having had a multitude of careers herself, it would seem Barbie could come up with more practical advice.

Granted, the developers of Hello Barbie have taken criticisms of the doll’s past manifestations into account in some of their programming of Hello Barbie’s responses. For example, she has been programmed to avoid the controversial statement about math being “hard” that her predecessor, the pull-string Teen Talk Barbie, opined. Math is now described by Hello Barbie as “cool.” A reformed Barbie sometimes imparts useful information. In a review of her for *PC Magazine*, Timothy Torres describes one developer’s interaction with the doll:

[Barbie] asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” To which one of the ToyTalk representatives replied, “I wanna be a scientist!” Barbie asked why. The rep explained, “I want to discover new things.” Then Barbie beamed, “Oh, like Marie Curie,” followed by a lengthy monologue about the greatness of girls getting into science.

Unfortunately, the doll's overriding focus remains on fashion. A case in point: Barbie's problems with context and her one-track, consumerist mindset are exploited in a parody sketch entitled "Grown Women Ask Hello Barbie Questions about Feminism."

She seems in need of some catching up on feminist issues:

Questioner 2: I would think Barbie's a feminist. She's had a lot of careers throughout her life. [To Barbie] How do you feel about the wage gap?

Barbie: I love it. Once in a while I catch myself dancing for no reason at all.

She evidences a one-track (fashion-track) mind:

Questioner 4: How do you feel about the fact we have never had a female president?

Barbie: Not even an it'sy bitsy, eensy weensy little bit. You know what I want to talk about? Fashion.

Of course, technological advancement, occurring at a rapid pace, may allow Mattel engineers to fix these flaws. The science fiction film *Her* may very well offer us a vision of what lies ahead in our not-too-distant future. A more fully enabled, Strong AI-empowered Barbie could verge on the Samantha OS1 (Operating System 1) featured here. A digital "companion" and confidante to Theodore Twombly, Samantha, more like a call-answering service, turns out to be capable of servicing a multitude of clients simultaneously. Ubiquitous and protean, as Twombly finds out to his dismay, she has been carrying on relationships not only with him but also with 641 other lovers! A digital miming/mining device, the apparatus of capture here has covertly downloaded as apps the apperceptions (e.g., accumulated past and present experiences, aptitudes, affects, and mind-sets) of a mass of people to build up her own database version of a "consciousness" and personhood. The less they exercise their own agency, the more she seems to draw down upon it. Still, Twombly is able ultimately to see through the illusion of companionship and intimacy offered by Samantha (who, herself enamored with the deceased philosopher Alan Watts, uploads to a more transcendent realm). He finally realizes the value of genuine human-to-human connection.

In the wider social context, Hello Barbie seeks to push "a set of neoliberal cultural ideas that privilege the individual, apolitical empowerment of girls and women" (Keller and Ryan 2018, 4). Advising the child to be a dancing politician, the doll is more than willing to set the tune. Focusing more on individual achievement and ambition, it would preclude the notion of solidarity with others. As Zaslow demonstrates, however, such solidarity and acting in the common interest are still operative in a so-called "post-feminist" era. Powers of resistance can effect changes, for example, as demonstrated by a group of middle school girls who rebelled against their school's gender-discriminating dress code with the #iamnotadistracted protest. Working with enlightened parents across generational divisions, they represent a brand of emerging feminism the author offers as a success story involving the power of girls operating through digital media to propagate feminist values in protesting a school's dress policy code's discrimination against females. Inserting itself between child and parent, devices such as Hello Barbie replace the call to action with the call to fashion.

Media panic entrepreneurs rightly find Hello Barbie's brand of synthetic empathy problematic. Thus, when Riley tells her she had a fish that died, the doll expresses sympathy, confiding to the girl, "I know what it's like to have a pet pass away. But we'll always keep the great memories we have of them, right?" Expressing umbrage over this exchange, Turkle demands, "Why are we letting this doll pretend it knows about dying? It doesn't." Turkle identifies a worrisome trend here in our socializing children to accept objects "as adequate conversational partners" (Fowler 2015). When asked about Mattel's Hello Barbie, Turkle's responded: "It's a pretend empathy device" (qtd. in Brown).

In Hello Barbie's defense, she represents only one item among many current and projected digitally enabled devices as the Internet of Things expands into our lives. In "How a Barbie Doll Prepares your Child for the Future," Mike Elgan points out that "Barbie works today like everything will work tomorrow." He projects a near future of increasing chatbots and digital advisers. Indeed, he informs us, soon your refrigerator will tell you when your milk is going sour and needs replacing. He argues that she is still better for children than simply sitting in front of a television screen or "any other screen-related technology, for that matter."

## 6. Parody and Play

While Foucault's technologies of power exert a considerable influence over subjects they seek to dominate and objectify, the technologies of self exert their own powers of resistance effected by both "their own means or with the help of others."

The web-connections that provide the doll with an array of responses and a memory may also prove to work against it. Surfing that same medium, girls can discover videos offering various methods of torturing Barbie, thereby undermining her status as a cultural icon. Studies in the last two decades have identified this practice among some of the children surveyed (Kuther and McDonald, 2002; "Babyish," 2005). Buckingham and Jensen note that the media "typically represent a broader range of competing perspectives" when reporting on the moral panics they reference (5). Mattel's efforts to protect Barbie's image from those satirizing it demonstrate on the company's part an acknowledgment that that image is under assault, contested.

A site of contestation through which various cultural influencers compete, Barbie not only speaks for herself at the behest of corporate interests but as an icon is also spoken through, multivocal. Her resilience is a testimony to her significance as a cultural object, a flashpoint for debate. She not only survives critiques but she also at times thrives on them. Thus, when Mattel failed to protect Barbie's copyrighted image in one instance, losing its suit against the makers of the satiric song "Aqua Barbie," it later bought the rights to the song. In a demonstration of the doll's ability to absorb criticism, the company even prominently featured one of the song's formerly offending lyrics: "I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world/Life in plastic, its fantastic."

## 7. "Liberating" Children

Closely examining media panics, Buckingham and Jensen find ulterior motives and condescending attitudes toward children on the part of those entrepreneurs ostensibly dedicated to protecting them. Inducing moral panics, these researchers argue, "is a means of reasserting *adult* authority," a particularly effective strategy in that those they propose to protect are portrayed as innocents threatened by corrupt forces (4). There have been two notable instances in which Barbie, the Teen Talk version, has been the victim of a hostile takeover, not by a competing corporation but by those who would "liberate" her, literally, by programming new and unaccustomed words into her voice box. The lessons gleaned through these efforts are relative to Hello Barbie, who also reflects the more traditional dolls' contested nature in their various manifestations.

In a *Simpsons*' episode entitled "Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy" (1994), we find the limits of externally imposed critiques of the doll. Lisa is given a Malibu Stacy pull-string doll, a thinly disguised stand-in for Teen Talk Barbie. Described by *Ms. Magazine* as a girl who has "inherited the successes of first- and second-wave feminists, and has grown up with a faith in true equality" (48), Imagining her addressing the United Nations General Assembly, each pull of the string deflates Lisa's high expectations for the doll:

"I wish they taught shopping in school."  
"Let's bake some cookies for the boys."  
"Don't ask me. I'm just a girl [tee hee, tee hee]."

Finding no sympathy from brother Bart, who laughs at her complaints, she delivers a stinging, heart-felt rebuke:

It's not funny, Bart. Millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act, that they can never be more than vacuous ninnyes whose only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband, and spend all day on the phone with their equally vacuous friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband.

Finding Stacy's inventor and rescuing her from an alcoholic stupor presumably brought on by unleashing the doll on the world, Lisa hatches a plan to market a new doll dubbed Lisa Lion Heart. Lisa's version is nothing short of a feminist ideal:

She'll have the wisdom of Gertrude Stein and the wit of Cathy Guisewite; the tenacity of Nina Totenberg and the common sense of Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and to top it off, the down-to-earth good looks of Eleanor Roosevelt!

While the developers of Hello Barbie took some pains to make their doll avoid some of the mistakes of Teen Talk Barbie, Lisa is even more diligent in programming and re-programming her creation until the message rings just right.



For example, her first pass at dialogue reads “When I get married, I’m keeping my own name.” On further consideration, she amends it to “Maybe that should be ‘If I *choose* to get married.’” Unfortunately, Lisa’s reconditioned doll fails to attract sales while a mob of girls race to get the latest Malibu Stacy whose only upgrade involves sporting a new hat. She does find some consolation in having attracted a single buyer, all the while sighing, “I guess you just can’t beat big business.”

Mathew Henry attributes the failure of Lisa’s product to a script written by males attempting to make the show appeal to the largest possible demographic. That demographic, moreover, exerts its own force. Thus, even when engaging in damage control, as when informed of the practice of Barbie torture, there is an undeniable truth in Mattel’s response that these girls represent a tiny minority of the millions of Barbie owners who adore their toys. Lisa’s efforts to put words into the mouth of a cultural icon demonstrate the limits of critique. While giving voice to Lisa’s full-throated critique of Barbie, the show cannot of its own accord change the cultural context in which the doll operates. Employing language beyond that of the typical eight-year-old (e.g. “vacuous” and “tenacity”), Lisa seems more like a proxy for media panic entrepreneurs seeking to impose their own authority and views through her.

A more egregious instance of adults acting in children’s “interests” can be found in the interventions of the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO), whose members purchased 300 Teen Talk Barbies and surgically removed their voice boxes. Before surreptitiously returning them to the stores, they replaced them with the voice boxes of another talking toy, G.I. Joe. In David Firestone’s account, the result was “a mutant colony of Barbies-on-steroids who roar things like ‘Attack!’ ‘Vengeance is mine!’ and ‘Eat lead, Cobra!’” The emasculated G. I. Joe’s, meanwhile, twitter, ‘Will we ever have enough clothes?’ and ‘Let’s plan our dream wedding!’” BLO’s hostile takeover of Barbie was aimed at adults not girls. Its tactics pander to adults but are not likely to convey a clear message to children distraught and confused by their toys’ changes of temperament and personality. Reasserting its own adult authority over what children should experience, BLO ends up discounting girls’ agency by acting on its own in their “behalf.”

In their haste to impose their own agenda media panic entrepreneurs often offer one-sided critiques that do not properly address elements contrary to their positions. Charges, for example, that Barbie’s unrealistic physique contributes to body dissatisfaction in females not only reflect a media effects’ line of reasoning but also overlook design requirements for the doll. Citing Lord, Scott observes that “Because the fabrics were the same as in the adult-sized versions of the clothes, Barbie’s waist had to be extra small to allow for the gathering at the base of the bodice” (2002, 154). Louise Collins and her co-authors are atypical in noting some feminists grudgingly “find a grain of truth in [creator Ruth] Handler’s view of Barbie as a role model who offers girls a career beyond motherhood, in contrast to baby dolls” (2012).

Ever resourceful, the company itself works hard to keep Barbie relevant, *au courant*. Mattel attempts its own image repair, as witnessed by a product advertisement in a recent Target ad. We find here displayed Barbie in various garbs, each poster entitled “You Can Be Anything Barbie.” Protean, the doll appears as a fashion model, artist, explorer, scientist, and athlete, among other career choices (“Barbie ad,” 2019). Groups generally opposed to Barbie have given their seal of approval. While indictments of the doll generally outnumber encomiums, Mattel does occasionally come up with a winning formula for her. Media panic entrepreneurs sometimes fail to consider how Mattel either willingly or unwillingly responds to criticisms of its products.

Protectionist attitudes promulgated by media panic entrepreneurs need to be evaluated by taking in the wider cultural context in which Barbie circulates. From her own experience, Driscoll describes girls as playing with Barbie “with both respect and passionate disregard for her hegemonic positions” (2005, 228). Wider cultural influences like hip-hop and riot grrrls, Kearney has argued, contribute indirectly if not directly to girls “asserting themselves in the public sphere and thus reconfiguring both girlhood and girls’ culture” (2009, 15). As the example of #iamnotadistracted shows, social critiques and protests can be effective when mounted by children in concert with adults (and not simply mounted by adults alone). On another front, Mark Schlichting, CEO of NoodleWorks Interactive, predicts AI devices like Smarty, a digital assistant for children, and Hello Barbie will encounter the same sort of trickery applied to them as Siri met when it first appeared (Corbyn 2016). Whether Hello Barbie will be able to talk herself out of the critiques of media panic entrepreneurs is less important than what attitudes girls themselves adopt toward her. Adults need to trust in their ability to talk back to Barbie. In doing so, girls will end up speaking for themselves.

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