



# Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture

*Barry Dornfeld*

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## **Producing Public Television, Producing Public Culture** Barry Dornfeld

From 1989 to 1991, Barry Dornfeld had an unusual double role on the crew of the major PBS documentary series *Childhood*. As a researcher for the series, he investigated the relationship between children and media. As an anthropologist, however, his subject was the television production process itself--examining, for example, how producers developed the series, negotiated with their academic advisors, and shaped footage shot around the world into seven programs. He presents the results of his fieldwork in this groundbreaking study--one of the first to take an ethnographic approach to the production of a television show, as opposed to its reception.

Dornfeld begins with a broad discussion of public television's role in American culture and goes on to examine documentaries as a form of popular anthropology. Drawing on his observations of *Childhood*, he considers the documentary form as a kind of "imagining," in which both producers and viewers construct understandings of themselves and others, revealing their conceptions of culture and history and their ideologies of cultural difference and universality. He argues that producers of culture should also be understood as consumers who conduct their work through an active envisioning of the audience. Dornfeld explores as well how intellectual media professionals struggle with the institutional and cultural forces surrounding television that promote entertainment at the expense of education. The book provides a rare glimpse behind the scenes of a major documentary and demonstrates the value of an ethnographic approach to the study of media production.

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