MEDIATING CHILDREN'S TV/VIDEO VIEWING - CENSORSHIP IN THE HOME?

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Children's development is the product of their biological potential, and interactions between the child and their environment. The key feature of the environment is their parents. who influence the developing child and in turn are influenced by the child, by their marital relationship and by forces external to the nuclear family. Belsky (1984) identifies three main determinants of parenting - the personal psychological resources of the parents, the characteristics of the child, and environmental sources of stress and support. These domains appear to be interdependent. An underestimated influence on young children's development is TV/video viewing.

The Media in Family Life

Each innovation in media technology has sparked considerable community, and later research, response. The introduction of silent movies around 1910, wireless shortly after, talking movies in the late 1920s, and TV in 1956 in Australia, were each accompanied by widespread concern about harms to children such as promoting aggressive behaviour, the subversive influence of advertising, and the displacement of reading, spontaneous play, sport and other outdoor activities (Wartella and Reeves 1982). Further innovation is imminent. Australia is on the threshold of a proliferation of TV channels via land cables and international satellite link-ups (U.S cities receive as many as fifty). Within twenty years a three-dimensional viewing format will probably be introduced.

Children are exposed to the electronic media - radio, TV and video - from birth. Most Australian cities offer a choice of at least twenty AM and FM stations, four TV channels and thousands of video titles. Infants are a passive audience to their parents radio and TV/video habits. Some young children are indicating program preferences by the time they become mobile (8-10 months), and by two years, many can operate a TV and VCR despite being unable to read (Pierce 1988). By three years, the average Australian child is watching at least 1-2 hours of TV a day. Age-related patterns of TV viewing by Australian children are consistent with those reported overseas. Duration of viewing rises gradually from early childhood to a peak in early adolescence, then declines sharply (Leibert 1986, Sheehan 1986). By the end of primary school, TV/video viewing occupies more of children's time than any other activity (Pierce 1988). For example, in an Australian study of ten to twelve year olds, 56% watched an average of three hours or more each day. About the same proportion watched TV at least some of the time while doing homework and having supper (see Sheehan 1986).

Children's access to violent and sexual material may be greater on video than on TV. However there are fewer data on children's viewing of this medium. A major

British study of the video viewing of 4,500 school age children (Barlow and Hill 1985) found that almost an half had seen one or more videos classified as restricted to adults only or otherwise prohibited, and almost 30% had seen four or more. Not surprisingly, when parents watched violent videos, their children were more likely to do so as well.

The Development of Media Literacy

An important development task for children is to become literate in TV and video. What does this mean? After three years, children know the difference between central and subordinate characters. After five they realise the plot has a beginning, middle and end. Not until eight or nine do they integrate subplots into the main theme, conserve parallel stories and organise the whole story into discrete episodes (Phillips 1988).

What are some of the ramifications of this? Pre-school children generally have a limited ability to distinguish between commercials and program, as well as between external reality and the content of television programs. Thus young children are highly susceptible to television advertising, and to a recent worrying innovation - 'program length commercials' - cartoon programs whose characters can be purchased as toys - such as Masters of the Universe. As another example, first and second grade children are not yet able to follow a complex plot-line through the entire sequence of discrete scenes. So they are often unable to associate a series of complex actions with the final consequence. Thus although the TV industry argues that programs are fundamentally prosocial because good ultimately triumphs over bad, it is quite probable that many young children do not get the intended moral message.

Let me tease apart the learning tasks in becoming a proficient TV/video viewer. The impact of TV/video is due to three components: the social content of programs; thematic elements such as suspense and humour; and formal features such as action, pace, cuts and zooms, dialogue and sound effects. Formal features are really the syntax and grammar of the media literate persons' viewing language. Salient formal features help the TV-literate child to understand social content - how much effort and close attention will be required, and how likely is it that attention will lead to acceptable comprehension (Wright and Huston 1983, Potts et al 1986, Rubenstein 1983).

TV literacy involves many cognitive and other tasks - learning to break a continuous stream of sights and sounds into meaningful units, recognising that formal features such as sad music signify some meaning within the story, focussing on important facts and ignoring others, and drawing inferences from special effects such as frozen shots, slow motion and zoom (Phillips 1988). Longitudinal studies of children aged from four to eighteen indicate that the ability to accurately distinguish between real people, realistic people and fantasy figures, to understand the nature and purpose of advertising, to make considered program choices, and to develop activities away from the media, follow a course of incremental development which is dependent on a number of factors (Phillips 1988).

Indeed what children bring to TV is at least as important as what TV brings to children (Schramm *et al* 1961). Key child factors include I.Q. and temperament. Other key factors include parents viewing habits and attitudes, and most pertinent to this discussion, *parental mediation of viewing - the control parents exercise and their desire to encourage discriminating TV/video viewing*. It is important to understand how the family and social context contributes to what children perceive, remember and adopt from TV viewing.

Parents earliest efforts at mediating children's viewing usually begin before three years. These are largely unresearched, as is the impact of early TV/video viewing on young children's social, emotional and cognitive development.

Harms Attributed to TV/Video

But why should parents bother about mediating at all? TV/video viewing familiarises young children with events in the outside world long before the opportunity to experience similar real life experiences would usually arise, and in a diversity beyond ordinary reality. The effects of these experiences may be cumulative and significant. For some children it does not seem to be just a harmless diversion. Detrimental behavioural, emotional and cognitive outcomes among children older than four years have been ascribed to certain viewing patterns. These are pertinent to this discussion:

(1) Amplification of aggressive behaviour

The association between heavy violence viewing in childhood and later aggressiveness has been confirmed in most countries in which it has been studied (Huesman and Eron, 1986). However the nature of the relationship is less clear. Other behavioural correlates include heavy violence viewing by parents, and more expressed hostility and violence in the families. Either may independently promote aggressiveness in the child, or may interact with the child's violence viewing to promote aggressiveness. For example, Singer and Singer (1986) report that heavy viewing by preschool children of aggressive action (adventure or cartoon shows) was associated with overt aggression during the primary school years, even after accounting for background family aggression. Alternatively, it has been suggested that aggression may be stimulated by high action shows irrespective of violent content, or that TV heightens arousal which is then channelled into various behaviours including aggression, depending on the circumstances.

In Australia, Sheehan (1987) has demonstrated that heavy violence viewing by Brisbane primary school children did not lead to a permanent increase in aggressiveness two years later. Parents' viewing habits were a better predictor of aggressiveness. His data were consistent with there being significant short term associations between degree of exposure to TV violence and children's aggression, and he suggests that lower aggressiveness in Australian society may have mediated the stronger relationship reported overseas.

(2) Inculcation with fears of a dangerous world

Children are easily shocked by violence in the news, fictional violence, programs with a theme of coercion and victimisation, and programs with an atmosphere of fear and dread (Singer *et al* 1984). Young children appear to be more frightened by grotesque or metamorphosing characters, whereas children older than eight years are more frightened by realistic depictions of possible events. (Sparks 1986). Children and adolescents who watch more TV are more fearful of being victims of crime, are more pessimistic about the crime rate and are less trustful of others, even when socioeconomic status, race and other potentially confounding traits are taken into account. They see the world as a "mean and nasty place" (Collins and Korac, 1982, Phillips 1988). Child psychologists and psychiatrists report that programs which contain violent scenes, themes of coercion and victimisation, or an atmosphere of fear and dread, exacerbate nightmares and fearfulness among children already in treatment, and precipitate referral of other children (Garner 1986, Waters 1989). This may have as serious implications for mental health as the concerns about promotion of violence and aggression (Singer and Singer 1983).

(3) Acceptance of stereotypes

The social reality of TV is sharply different from the everyday reality of most children's lives. TV builds up stereotypes and may lay the ground for prejudice. Women, children, old people and racial minorities are under-represented. Doctors, police and criminals are over represented. Family life and relationships are often portrayed in stereotypic, often romantic, ways - inept fathers, precocious children, and marked contrasts between working class and middle class families. Women in traditional roles are presented more favourably, whereas single women are more likely to be portrayed as victims of violence and employed women as villains. TV also positively influences children's perceptions of appropriate roles for men and women, such as by portraying girls in non-traditional jobs. Cross-sectional studies indicate that heavy viewing children do learn the stereotypes presented on TV. Fortunately, however, it seems that the industry has heeded community concerns, and stereotypes do appear to be softening.

Mediation of Children's Viewing

Current Australian data on supervision of children's viewing give grounds for concern. Here as overseas, children are watching TV unsupervised by their parents - either at home when their parents are not watching (for example early morning cartoons), or in the homes of other children. Video viewing is also frequently unsupervised. Parents are not aware of how many prohibited videos their children watch - often in the homes of other children where they have been rented by an older child, or where adult rentals are accessible (SACCFT 1986). Indeed, Sheehan (1987) has aptly described video as 'guerilla TV'.

Parents' desire to mediate their children's viewing probably reflects empathy with, and attuned responsiveness to, the child. The process of mediation, with co-viewing, discussion and directives, is a form of regulation of the child which the

parent hopes will lead to internalisation of values about viewing and the ability to self regulate.

So it is not surprising that many parents do attempt to mediate their children's TV/video viewing from an early age - by setting rules about viewing times and permissible programs, by co-viewing and discussing programs, and by changing their own viewing habits to conform to the standards they expect of their children (Corder-Bolz 1980, Phillips 1988, Singer and Singer 1986). The child's age when parents do this depends partly on their own beliefs about when children should become media literate, and partly on when they observe their children exercising program preferences themselves. Some parents wish to mediate their children's viewing but do not do so, or limit mediation to prescribing (exercising prohibitions, or using restrictions on viewing as a punishment). Unfortunately yet others are quite indifferent to their children's viewing.

Programs aimed at mediating children's viewing habits and helping them become more discriminating viewers have been designed for parents, teachers and children themselves. None have been designed for, and evaluated with, children younger than three years, despite the fact that most are regular, and if not heavy, viewers by then.

What do we know about these programs? Raising parents' awareness about recommended patterns of viewing is largely ineffective (Singer and Singer 1983). Parental censorship by prohibition is not the answer either, and it may promote illicit viewing. Singer and Singer (1983) recommend constructive mediation. They train parents to view with their children, discuss programs, monitor and limit heavy viewing, as well as provide alternative sources of educational entertainment (such as imaginative play) that might moderate the effects of TV viewing.

Australian parent organisations recommend the following techniques to mediate children's TV viewing

Recommended Techniques for Parents

1. Be aware of children's viewing patterns - how much and what they watch.
2. Monitor children's program preferences.
3. Discourage viewing violent programs.
4. Help young children distinguish fact from fantasy by talking with them about this during and after the programs.
5. Watch the program with the child and discuss it with them.
6. Teach the child to become a critical consumer (by helping them appraise the message and truthfulness of commercials).
7. Don't be afraid to say NO to undesirable programs.
8. Encourage the child to watch programs the parent considers desirable, interesting or beneficial to them.

Singer and Singer (1983) have also designed programs to orient children to the TV medium, its structure, hazards and potentials, and how to approach it more critically. They used teachers to help children understand the different types of programs, the difference between reality and fantasy on TV, how special effects work, about commercials, how TV works and programs are made, how TV influences ideas and feelings, and how children can control their own viewing habits. Results indicate that children exposed to this program show a greater increase in knowledge about TV than control children and that they became more effective in distinguishing between real people, realistic people and fantasy figures. These gains appeared to be maintained over some months.

Classification and Regulation

So what should be done? I believe that sanitising television by tougher censorship and regulation is undesirable, impractical and probably ineffective. For example, no amount of planning will eliminate the risk that some susceptible individuals will be provoked into violence or suicide by TV news, documentary or drama. However the likelihood may be able to be reduced. The policy should be one of 'harm reduction'. While some changes to classification and regulation are warranted, they will not allay public concern completely nor will they curtail all the perceived harms. The viewing public has to match government regulatory action with a commitment to regulate its own viewing and to establish more discerning viewing patterns. Families should take up this responsibility in their homes, and should lobby for media education in their children's schools. The television industry can help by providing information to parents through the window they have into homes - the medium itself.

Providing digestible information about program classification is also critical. The classification schemes for television programs and film/video overlap considerably, and perhaps confuse more than clarify (see Table at the conclusion of this article). It would help if the same classification system could be used for television and film/video. Complementing this with a classification awareness campaign targetted at the viewing public would help get the message across. However no amount of education will convert all heavy violence viewers into discriminating viewers. Indeed, simply raising awareness about classification is unlikely to produce much change. People need practical advice such as that suggested by parent groups. Even under these circumstances, it is unlikely that collectively, behaviour will do more than shift in the desired direction.

Thus enforceable regulations which complement education, and which limit the amount of violence shown on television, are an important facet of any planned response. There is one particular television guideline change I would like to see introduced as soon as possible. Australian Broadcasting Tribunal data show clearly that the child audiences peaks at 8.30 p.m. Thus to permit AO viewing from 8.30 p.m. onwards exposes many children to programs which have been judged as unsuitable for them. AO viewing must be postponed until after 9.30 p.m.

The right of freedom of expression, and the right of individuals and their children are not to be exposed to inappropriately aggressive material, are in conflict. The balance struck between them necessitates classification, enforceable and enforced regulations, and a more confidently discerning audience.

COMPARISON OF GUIDELINES

T.V.	CLASSIFICATION		VIDEO/FILM
Physical/psychological violence or language should not cause alarm or distress to children.(televised any time)	G	G	Minimal, mild, incidental violence provided context justifies
Inexplicit, discreet, stylized violence appropriate to content	PGR	PG	Violent impact mild/stylised or theatrical/historical content
Not 6.00a.m.-8.30a.m.W'days 4.00p.m.-7.30p.m.W'days 6.00a.m.-7.30p.m.W'ends/ Hols			
May be realistic if appropriate to context but not excessive or gratuitous	AO	M	Medium realistic/high if context justifies
Not 5.00a.m.-12.00p.m.W'days 3.00p.m.- 8.30p.m.W'days 5.00a.m.- 8.30p.m.W'days/Hols		R	Highly realistic/explicit violence but *not* unduly detailed, realistic cruel
		NVE(X)	No sexual violence,coercion or non-consent
Not suitable for television because explicit, gratuitious, unduly bloody/horrific, sexual violence	NST	RC	Refused Classification because unduly detailed/relished, explicit or unjustified non-consensual sexual violence, promotes terrorist acts

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