

PRESENTATION OF PAPER

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The visual media, television, video, and film are now a fact of life. They have been gradually becoming more sophisticated over the past five or six decades, or longer. We are on the threshold of new developments: a proliferation of television channels, up to as many as fifty or sixty depending on whether the cable or the satellite gets to us first; a three dimensional format which will make the visual media even more compelling and appear to hold the truth for even more people than it does at the moment. We are already involved in a huge video industry with thousands of titles available which are easily accessible to virtually everybody.

The thesis which I want to advance is that censorship isn't just the business of the regulators. It is not just the business of government, it is not even just the business of the medium that presents the material to us, but that it is also a personal responsibility and I think Paul Wilson has already alluded to that. Because it is a personal responsibility and because people become consumers of the medium in a gradual kind of way based on the experience they have starting in the home of television being regulated and mediated by their parents, we need to harness that process. I would describe it technically as a 'developmental process' in many of its facets. We need to harness it if we are going to come up with a reasonable approach towards censorship.

Now censorship isn't one of those absolute things. I disagree with Paul when he says that he abhors censorship, because he practices censorship all the time. Our society is regulated in hundreds of different ways. Really the whole issue has to do with where we draw the line. Not whether we censor or not, but how much of it we permit and in what domains we permit it.

I would like now to highlight some of the key points of my paper. The first point is to emphasise the notion that kids learn to use the medium of television gradually and from a very early age. We have been interviewing parents who have just had babies very recently. All these children are four months old. Now you would be surprised how many kids are sat in their bouncinette in front of the box and are already rivetted at the age of four months. One parent actually did that deliberately - she wanted her kid to start learning about TV. So it is very clear that kids from infancy are at the very least a passive audience and in some cases are already starting to become more active. Certainly by the age of eight or ten months they are starting to show program preference. They do not like programs with the loud jarring noises, they like well modulated voices and pictures which are visually stimulating as well. Obviously they are not able to make much sense out of what goes on there but clearly the medium has some appeal to them. By the age of two years many children can already operate the television or the video cassette recorder. In fact Chester Pierce referred to some of them as 'video virtuosos' by that age. Indeed it is a not uncommon when the video is introduced into the home for the young child to be the first one to use it and to be teaching their parents even before they can read the manuals. By the age of three years the average Australian child is watching between

an hour and a half and two hours of television a day. At the age of ten, or shortly after that, for the average child, viewing peaks at three hours plus a day. It starts to drop off in the teenage years when other sorts of things are happening in children's lives that they find a lot more interesting.

It is clear that we have underestimated the influence of television in children's development. If I can put it in a fairly crass way but one that is truthful, kids, certainly in primary school, spend about as much time in front of TV as they spend at school and certainly more time listening to the news (in the general sense) from television, than they do to listening to what their parents have got to say. It is probably fair to say that the medium is no less an influence on children's lives than are parents and is school. So we have got to take some notice of it.

Now let me tell you a little about the development of media literacy. It is actually quite a complex business which we are only just starting to understand. One of the tragedies of the research on the development of media literacy and particularly on children's viewing patterns and the modifiability of these, is that it mostly starts with kids aged four and up. It is clear that many kids by the age of four are already heavy TV users.

Now there are a number of aspects to media literacy. Being able to choose programs and operate the machinery are some, but there are a lot of rather complex cognitive things that go on. For example it is not really until the age of about three years that children are able to differentiate between central and subordinate characters in a plot. In other words that they can sort out who is important, who is the central figure and who is relatively irrelevant to the storyline. By the age of five years normally they are starting to be able to see that stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. It is not really until the age of nine that they start to subdivide sub-plots into main themes and to sort and store simultaneously the parallel stories that go on within a lot of shows, and break the story down into discrete episodes. Certainly some children can do these things earlier but generally their ability is overestimated. For example, when the industry talks about the moral messages that there are in a lot of television programmes, especially for pre-school and early school age children, it is reasonably clear that they are not able to get the intended moral message. It is usually embedded in too complex a matrix for them and yet the industry gets away with putting a lot of things on TV under the guise of responsible programming.

I want to just make a point about video on the side. We know very little about video. It is a new medium and unfortunately one over which researchers and parents don't have a lot of control. Through it children very often watch the sorts of things that worry parents most out of the ken of parents. It is what Peter Sheehan, a psychologist from Queensland who is very influential in this area, has referred to as 'guerilla television' and I think that is a reasonable description.

To comment further on media literacy, I think it is important that one realises that the TV just doesn't tell stories. There is a social content but there are also quite important other aspects to it. Firstly, the thematic elements, the way that suspense, humour and things like that are conveyed. Also the formal features - these are actually quite important. They are things like cuts, zooms, action, and pace, sound effects, dialogue, the tricks that the media use to get the message across. Now kids need to learn how to use those kinds of things. Kids are often quite confused, for example, by flashbacks. It takes a little while for them to learn that the people don't age backwards, that this is a trick. So the child in terms of becoming media literate needs to be able to do a number of things. They need to be able to first of all to break the sights and sounds into bite sized chunks, meaningful units that make sense to them. They need to recognize the meaning of the formal features, the flashbacks etc. They need to be able to maintain selective attention. In other words they need to be able to focus on the central issue or plot to a greater extent than they focus on the peripheral things, and be able to sort those things out. To be able to focus properly. They need to be able to make a number of inferences from special effects and they do these things at different paces in their development. Some happen quite late - not until the age of six or seven or eight years as I have mentioned.

I have raised a number of issues about why it is that parents should be concerned about television and video -three things in particular. The best known of course is the amplification of aggressive behaviour and there is good data about aggressive behaviour being associated with high-aggression viewing. The nature of the relationship though is a little less clear because there are other things that are also associated with increases in aggressive behaviour in kids. Firstly, that their parents are often heavy violence viewers and secondly, they tend to come from families that are more violent so these aren't really competing explanations but things that complement each other or enhance the effect of aggressive television but there are other explanations as well. There is also evidence kids are rendered more aggressive by high action movies or by movies that seem to arouse them a great deal. I don't think all the evidence is in but it would be stupid of us to say that the likelihood is that aggressive TV is benign.

I think more worrying is the obverse of the amplification of aggressive behaviour. The effect that a lot of violence on television has on kids of filling them up with all kinds of fears. The sorts of fears that they get from news and fictional violence, from scenes of coercion and victimisation and from an atmosphere of fear and dread in some films. Some kids see the world as a mean and nasty place because of what they watch on television, especially if television is their main window on the world. Certainly kids that are fearful by nature have their fears amplified by television. Finally, there is the notion of acceptance of stereotypes, another harm attributed to the medium which Ms Thornton is going to talk about a little bit more.

Now what can parents do about this? Unfortunately many parents only regulate television by prohibition. They just say "No". There is a lot more that parents can do than that. The parent who mediates their child's television viewing appropriately is somebody who sets rules about viewing times and about what

programmes are permissible, who co-views and discusses programmes with their children and who practices the same sorts of standards they want to promote. Co-viewing includes things like helping children to distinguish fact from fantasy by discussing it with them during and after the program. By talking to them about commercials and whether commercials tell the truth, by encouraging them to watch programs that parents consider desirable. All of these are the practical things parents can do. Unfortunately, as is the fact with most public education programs raising awareness, telling people that this is a neat idea doesn't really change their behaviour very much. If we are going to effectively help parents to be the kinds of parents they want to be, and most parents want their children to watch certain socially desirable programs, we are going to have to harness that motivation by turning to the medium itself. I think the industry has to take some of the responsibility in terms of training parents to mediate their own kids' viewing. After all, particularly those households in which we think there is the greatest danger of kids becoming indiscriminate viewers, the medium itself is the window into those homes and we ought to use it.

I shall just finish by touching on a couple of key points. In addition to the media being mobilised to help train parents, we also need to provide the public with more digestible information about program classification. John Dickie has spoken about this. In the paper I contrast the different terms that are used in what are essentially the same visual media which I think are somewhat confusing. I think it is important that the public isn't confused by classification - that they find it a useful kind of thing that helps give them guidelines about what they ought to be doing in their home.

I also think that we need to have regulations about censorship which are enforceable. I don't think that we need to change the regulations a great deal at the moment but I do think that we need to move away from the medium regulating itself. I think that has been an abject failure. The industry hasn't really been all that responsible about it. There is one thing that I particularly would like to see changed. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal data shows very clearly that the child audience peaks at 8.30 at night. Now that of course is exactly when AO viewing starts. If they are serious about the intent of AO viewing the A.B.T. is going to have to crank that back a little bit to probably 9.30 or maybe even 10 o'clock at night when there is a reasonable expectation that there won't be all that many children watching.

In finishing I would like to just reiterate what I say at the end of my paper, that I believe that the right of freedom of expression and the right of individuals and their children not to be exposed to inappropriately aggressive and sexual material are in conflict. The balance to be struck between them is going to necessitate classification, enforceable and enforced regulations and most importantly a more confidently discerning audience. There are things that we can do to train the young people of Australia to become a discerning audience and I hope that the A.B.T. enquiry and other things that are going on at the moment will provide the vehicle for that to happen.