

Concluding remarks

## The Children's Television Act: Can media policy make a difference?☆

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Our initial decision to study what children were learning from programs mandated by the Children's Television Act (CTA) was inspired by content analyses of these programs (e.g., Jordan, Schmitt, & Woodard, 2002; Kunkel & Canepa, 1994). While it is the access to educational content on commercial broadcast stations that is required by law, we believed that an equally important question was if children got the message. Our studies suggest that they do indeed get them, and perhaps more importantly, that they are reasonably good at generalizing those messages to their own lives. That the messages they have available to them for processing and learning are primarily prosocial rather than academic in nature is not surprising.

Broadcasters are concerned with ratings (Mitroff, 2003; Stipp, 2003). Is this show profitable? Does it get enough eyeballs on the screen? For broadcasters, getting the educational message to children is an incidental outcome of their legal obligation (Mitroff, 2003). Yet the truest value of the CTA may be just that: getting children to understand the educational messages (Kunkel, 2003). Is learning prosocial content enough to consider the CTA effective media policy, or are our children being short-changed on the academic front?

### 1. What is educational content?

We are educators. Educational content to us is “1, 2, 3” and “A, B, C.” However, with a single act, the academic tradition of educational television was lost. Educational and informational programming was defined so broadly that just about any content could be

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☆ The concluding remarks were written before commentary was available from Dr. Brian Wilcox.

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construed as benefiting children's development. Programs with academic or prosocial lessons became equally viable modes for broadcasters to fulfill their CTA obligation, and the traditional distinctions made by media researchers between academic and prosocial content became obsolete, at least in the media policy area, whether researchers agreed or not.

The definitional issues of the CTA exacerbated differences between those in academia, who knew that television could educate children (Anderson, 2003; Jordan, 2003), and those in industry, who believed that children, particularly after the preschool years, were less likely to view academic than prosocial television programs (Stipp, 2003). These differences in perspective are revealed in the commentaries about our article, and it is a potential divide that must be crossed if educational television of an academic or a prosocial nature is ever to flourish.

## 2. How does children's educational television look in industry and in academia?

Television writers are gifted storytellers (Mitroff, 2003). They do not come from a tradition of the sciences as much as from a tradition of the arts. So they write about what the best writers write about—what they know—in a form that suits their style—storytelling. They are not trained to write about academic lessons, and perhaps the only group of writers who really know how to do so effectively find themselves at PBS. So we have a group of storytellers who are mandated to write about educational content, and they choose the story format and the prosocial lesson as their way to meet their legal “obligation.”

Would they choose an academic format and learn to write in that style if the broadcasters wanted academically oriented programs or if the law required it? Of course they would. However, economic realities and consumer preferences for prosocial content entrench the status quo, leading to few innovations in the world of television, particularly children's television.

There are notable exceptions to this rule. *The Magic School Bus*, developed by Scholastic, integrated science lessons within a story quite effectively. Ms. Frizzle takes her grade school class on magical adventures exploring the inside of the human body, the outer planets, the depths of the seas. In the *Wild Thornberries*, Eliza lives in a family that creates films about animals in their natural habitats; geography and science lessons are hidden in the program, an idea espoused by Dr. Mitroff. Indeed, stealth education may be a key in the success of both programs. So we agree with Drs. Anderson and Jordan that academic lessons of value can be transmitted effectively to the middle childhood group, and we definitely agree that children who choose to view academically oriented programs will do better in school in the long run (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001).

There is one key phrase here—choose to view. Unless children choose to view a program, there is no audience to educate (Stipp, 2003). American children generally choose to spend their free time doing enjoyable activities, not ones that require high levels of effort. The dense academic messages presented in many of the television programs in our sample were often difficult for a young audience to follow. It is difficult to remember details of a presentation unless you take notes. And we do not expect to see children taking notes from academically

oriented television programs unless they are in a school setting. Instead, we take away the gist of the program, not the details, and that is what makes the story an efficient way to get important messages across to children. The moral of the program can be extracted and an important lesson gained, even if we do not recall all the story details.

Does it matter if the message being learned is not a novel one, unknown before seeing the present television program (Jordan, 2003)? The answer to this question depends on your goals. For broadcasters, the goal continues to be one of revenue generation. Without high ratings, programs are cancelled. For academics, one wants students to know something new each time they leave our class or view an educational television program, but even then, that information must still fit into an already existing knowledge base to make an impact.

Academic programs are often difficult to understand, but prosocial programs can also be challenging. Prosocial programs can reflect the complexities of life and the difficult problems that children face. In an episode of *Hey Arnold!* titled “Bunny Pajamas,” for instance, Arnold accidentally betrays his friend Iggy’s trust by letting it spill that a cool guy still wore pajamas with bunny feet. Arnold tried everything he could think of to earn Iggy’s forgiveness and renewed trust, but Iggy wanted revenge. For Iggy’s forgiveness, Arnold publicly walked in front of his friends in Iggy’s bunny pajamas. Iggy tried to stop him at the last minute because he overheard two boys talking about how Arnold’s disclosure had really been an accident. But it was too late. Arnold was humiliated. Now Arnold knew how Iggy had felt: Arnold was angry and hurt, and he did not want to forgive Iggy. And Iggy knew how Arnold had felt: Iggy felt remorse. The story ends with Iggy apologizing and asking Arnold what he could do to make it up to him. What is the resolution of their conflict? That decision was left up to the children who viewed this program.

These are the kinds of big issues that children are confronted with in their everyday lives. Just because the issue is familiar to them does not mean it is less important than a novel situation. In fact, the reality may be quite the opposite. Television can guide children through social issues, helping them to create friends rather than enemies in times of conflict.

Children who fail in school are also more likely to be rejected by normal peers, suggesting that they lack prosocial as well as academic skills (Patterson, DeBarshyshe, & Ramsey, 1989). So we have come full circle: While it is desirable for children to view academic television content, there are many benefits to be gained from viewing prosocial programs as well. When children learn not to cheat, not to steal, not to extract revenge, how to be a friend, show sympathy towards others, and help others, they are better people for it and our world is a better place.

### **3. Can we bridge the gap between business and the academy?**

Academics generate new knowledge and disseminate it. Commercial broadcasters entertain us in our free time to make money. How can we create a meaningful dialogue between broadcaster and academics that can benefit our youth?

One way to create a meaningful dialogue is to expand partnerships and exchanges where those from industry and those from academia spend time in each other’s camps, learning the

lay of the land. *Nickelodeon* and *Sesame Workshop*, for example, support summer internships for students, and their employees sometimes return to the academy to obtain advanced degrees from us. We need to expand this network so that there is an ongoing exchange in ideas and perspectives between the academy and all broadcasters.

Another way to improve the dialogue between the business and academic worlds is to work together to create high quality programs that children will view. In our study, we found that almost all children view educational programs and take away significant messages after viewing them. But we also found that we lose the audience over time, particularly the older boys. Why? Comparisons with strictly entertainment-driven programs shed some light on how effective educational television programs really are. The target audience for broadcasters is boys, in part because they watch more television than girls, and boys prefer action–adventure television programs (Mitroff, 2003). However, it is also important to note that we found that many children, including boys, liked the prosocial programs, even when they could choose strictly entertainment-based programs. Put another way, there is an audience for prosocial programs. Issues like trust, friendship, helping others, and empathy are important in the development of constructive rather than destructive social relationships. When you teach empathy by focusing children’s attention on how another person feels, you may well be decreasing the chances that they will strike out in aggressive, retaliatory actions in real life. Therefore, we believe that the inclusion of more prosocial television is a significant step forward in using television to benefit our children.

But what do we do about those academically oriented programs that by nature have a smaller target age group and that broadcasters believe will not draw a sufficient audience? This is the domain of academia. We are teachers. If we want quality educational television programs, this is a key area for our contributions. But our ideas must be wanted and that requires a relationship to be forged. Dr. Anderson is an excellent example of one who has learned to guide television programming development for broadcasters, working as a consultant for *Nickjr* as well as for *Sesame Street*. This partnership between business and the academy has been very successful. We need similar expertise brought to bear at the grade school level.

Past research demonstrates that academically oriented programs often do better in the classroom (Ball & Bogatz, 1973), where ratings are less a factor, than in the home where children are often relaxing and seeking entertainment. While we are not advocating that schools incorporate educational television programs into their already busy curriculum, we do think that educational programs could find a good home in after-school programs. ABC after-school television specials once presented very good programming for children during the weekday. How about integrating this kind of idea into after-school programs, a less formal situation than our schools and a more formal situation than our homes? After-school programs could build on both prosocial and academically oriented content and foster interest in, and learning of, the more difficult academic content. Supplemental Internet resources could make educational program messages even more accessible to the child audience.

Academic content can also be embedded in a story. The dominant format of the academic programs in our sample was a magazine, with discrete vignettes presenting scholastically driven messages. We think it is time to get this information across seamlessly in a story, as has

been done in the past, but not nearly enough. This is not an easy task. Stories often portray academic content as the incidental rather than as the central plot-relevant content. These strains of content must be integrated to be maximally effective.

Building an audience for educational programs is a time-intensive effort, but it must be done if we are to sustain quality educational television programs. So how can that goal be accomplished? First, know your audience. For example, girls and boys do not necessarily like the same television programs, but they did share some favorite programs in our sample—notably *Hey Arnold!*, *Doug*, and *Wild Thornberries*. Focus groups could teach us quite a bit about how to create successful programs for the middle childhood age group. Second, repetition and familiarity with the program characters can be a plus, but it also has its limitations. Younger children will tolerate more program repetition of the same exact episode than older children will. Repeated exposure to an overall program series may help children, in part, by fostering identification with favorite characters and by making the content more comprehensible. This familiarity and interest with parasocial media friends captures their interests. Even so, we all eventually “break up” with our favorite characters and programs? Why? Third, in the new media environment, it is increasingly important to create web sites that build on the character’s attractive qualities. It is in this interactive venue that academic media messages can be explored in more depth. Fourth, in academia, college students vote with their feet: They stop enrolling in our classes if they are bored. In the broadcast industry, children vote with their eyeballs. If there is no child audience, nothing will be learned, no matter how important adults think a lesson is.

#### **4. What does the future hold for media policy?**

Have we missed the boat with the new media, as Dr. Mitroff asks? Not yet. The control that children have in the world of online interactive media, video games, and cable access is unprecedented, making it even more important to understand what they like. However, the kind of control needed is different in observational and interactive media. We believe that there will be a continuing interest in traditional television tales and films because they fill a need for the audience to be engaged in the life stories of others.

Can social policies about media make a difference? Absolutely. The violent content that proliferated children’s television programs has virtually disappeared on the “Big 3” networks as a result of the CTA, with mostly prosocial and a little academically oriented content taking its place (Jordan et al., 2002). While the specific content has changed since our studies were conducted, the kinds of prosocial and academically oriented programs being created have not. It is less clear how the CTA will be implemented in the new interactive media environment.

It is important to take a proactive rather than a reactive stance to media policy issues. Take, for example, a current question about media consolidation in which a few players are increasingly in control of what is on the public air waves. *Children Now*, a child advocacy group, argues that media consolidation may lead to a loss in the diversity of children’s television programming, and they argue for time to study the issue before the FCC makes a decision. In fact, we have no research to inform us or governmental agencies about how

media consolidation will affect children's access to television programming, yet it is sure to change the media landscape. We can say that quality television programs that were available only on cable outlets at the time of our studies are now available to poorer children via the commercial networks, and that is occurring because of network consolidation.

## 5. Is media policy effective?

Television content can enhance the development of our youth. With research, we can provide information to policy makers to assist their decisions. The key is to conduct the research quickly and to get ahead of the issues as the long time frame required by peer review in the academic world is out of step with the quick business and policy decisions made by those who create programs and legislation and who enforce rules about the media marketplace.

We believe that the CTA is in essence a compromise, replacing predominantly violent content with prosocial material, otherwise known as FCC friendly content. Although academic content is not flourishing under the CTA, this compromise has improved the quality of children's media experiences. We hope this has had some spillover effects into children's every day lives. The CTA made a difference in children's lives: It fostered quality prosocial television programs for our youth that they could understand and apply to their lives, and this accomplishment, we believe, makes the CTA an important and effective step forward in the media policy area.

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