



Television's Hidden Curriculum

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WHETHER intended or not, television exerts a powerful influence on the lives of young viewers. Not only does television affect patterns of eating, sleeping, and recreation, but it can lead to changes in social behavior and in an individual's perceptions and values regarding the real world. Until recently, most of the influence of this powerful medium has been negative. Violence, criminal behavior, and stereotyped views of people have predominated in most television programs for both children and adults. The life that is depicted on most television shows is a life in which violence prevails, motives are strictly prosocial or antisocial, and aggressive action, whether for good or evil, wins and is rewarded. The "good guys"—and, in fact, most of the central characters in television—are white, middle-class, American males. Minorities, working-class people, foreigners, and women are either presented in a negatively stereotyped fashion or are completely absent from the television world. Although any visual presentation is necessarily biased and distorted in that it selectively represents and interprets people and events, commercial television represents a particularly narrow

range of both individual differences and individual responses to conflicts or frustrations.

These messages in commercial television are a potent influence on the behavior, perceptions, and values of many viewers, both children and adults. There is extensive research showing a direct relationship between children's viewing of televised violence and increased aggression,¹ and other data showing that television alters an individual's perceptions and values about the real world.² Adults and children alike form misconceptions based on the misrepresentation of reality in television fiction, but the power of the television medium is especially great for children, whose limited experiences and paucity of information about the real world make them more susceptible.

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Why not use the medium's power for more positive educational purposes? That goal is the basis of a number of current educational television programs for children. Most of these programs have followed one of two routes: they have attempted to promote cognitive development, or to enhance positive social and emotional (prosocial) growth. A few programs have combined both.

In this article, we want to examine the innovative use of broadcast television as an instrument of purposeful instruction for children. Although public television certainly produces most of the educational programming, we will look at both commercial and public network programs, including "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," "Sesame Street," "The Electric Company," "Carrascolendas," "Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids," "Inside/Out," "Big Blue Marble," and "Vegetable Soup."*

Our discussion of these children's shows will focus on a few basic questions: What are the general goals of the program? What specific themes are represented? How are these themes expressed to the audience? And, finally, how effective is the program in meeting its objectives? Unfortunately, there is little research on the effectiveness of most of these shows, contrary to the relative abundance of literature on the effects of televised violence on children. Thus our secondary purpose here is to provide some guidelines for the communication and evaluation of program goals.



Most of the research has been focused on the effects of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" and "Sesame Street," two of the longest running educational shows for children. Although both of these programs are designed for a preschool audience, the findings about their effects may be generalized in some instances to programs intended for older children.

The general objective of "Mister Rogers" is the enhancement of social and emotional growth, commonly called "prosocial" development by social scientists. The program is characterized by its slow pace and its focus on certain prosocial

themes, including: 1) persistence and delay of gratification; 2) self-regulating behavior (learning to accept rules, learning to wait, coping with frustration, learning to control aggressive impulses, and finding alternative courses of action); 3) recognition and identification of feelings (self and others); 4) verbalization of feelings; 5) self-perception (uniqueness of each individual and acceptance of differences in self and others); and 6) helping, sharing, and cooperative behavior.³ What a contrast to the violent and stereotypic themes of traditional television fare!

The themes of the show are expressed to children by two means. The first is a fictional story set in the "Neighborhood of Make-Believe," where conflict situations and an extensive range of feelings abound. Whatever the motives of the characters (and they are seldom, if ever, at either one extreme or the other), the resolution of conflict and understanding of feelings comes through discussion, cooperation, helping others, and thoughtful effort. In the other segment of the program, Rogers talks directly to the audience in a gentle, warm, accepting manner. He explains the themes of the fantasy segment and emphasizes the individual worth of the child viewer through speech and song.

A number of experimental studies have demonstrated that children from three to six years of age increase in the verbalization of their own feelings, in the empathetic understanding of others' feelings, and in cooperation and sharing, even after only brief exposure to the series (one to five sessions). In addition, some studies have noted increases in task persistence and the acceptance of rules.⁴

There is consistent evidence that "Mister Rogers" also increases fantasy or imaginative play in children,⁵ a behavioral theme not previously identified, but one typically characteristic of the series. The value of pretending is emphasized by Rogers, and it is the basis of much of the story line. Preschoolers who have seen the program act out prosocial themes in fantasy play, especially when provided with free-play materials like those in the program.⁶ In sum, both in nonfantasy and fantasy activities, children's behavior is being changed in the direction of positive social and emotional growth.

"Sesame Street" is characterized by its fast pace and its emphasis on cognitive skills. A major goal of the program since

* The exclusion of other educational programs for children is not meant to ascribe a lesser degree of importance to these shows; rather, length constraints forced the exclusion of some programs not publicized in the literature and less well known by the authors.

its creation has been to prevent the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged from widening and to prepare all children for later school experiences. Specifically, the goals of "Sesame Street" are to teach such skills as symbolic representation (letters, numbers, geometric forms) and cognitive processes (perceptual discrimination, relational concepts, classification, ordering, reasoning, and problem solving), as well as to indirectly encourage an understanding of the physical and social environment. (For production and instructional purposes, specific behavioral objectives have been explicitly described, but they are too lengthy to include here.)⁷

The ingenious and creative techniques that the "Sesame Street" team devised in expressing their goals deserve considerable applause. Basically, the creators sought to increase, direct, and sustain attention and to teach specific cognitive skills by way of a wide variety of entertaining formats, such as "speech balloons" (a learning device for language); narrow focusing on central content; the familiar as a bridge to the unfamiliar; music and sound effects to signal attention and teach auditory discrimination; repetition to recapture attention and allow for practice; and surprise and incongruity to aid attention and learning. Other production characteristics meant to direct and hold attention include animation, action, humor, anticipation, and diverse program elements. All of these techniques have combined to make "Sesame Street" popular with children of all ages, as well as with many adults.

Is this popularity synonymous with success? Do the entertaining style of the show and its innovative representation actually teach cognitive skills? Studies conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) during the first two years of the program show that cognitive gains were made by both advantaged and disadvantaged children who watched "Sesame Street." Regular viewers learned letter and number skills, classification, problem solving, and reasoning skills. Three-year-olds learned more than five-year-olds. Disadvantaged children who were frequent viewers gained as much as advantaged viewers, but the initial difference between the two groups was not reduced.⁸

Recently, however, a controversy has arisen over the show's effectiveness. Another group of evaluators has asserted

that "Sesame Street" is actually *increasing* the learning gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Although disadvantaged children can learn as much as advantaged children if they watch the show regularly, fewer disadvantaged children may be watching the program.⁹ The figures used in this study are primarily from the first two years of broadcasting, and they may have changed as the program has become better known and more widely available on commercial as well as educational stations. Unfortunately, there are no reliable figures indicating what proportion of disadvantaged children now watch "Sesame Street"; in any case, it is clear that it can be an effective teacher for children who view it regularly.

Despite its successes, "Sesame Street" has encountered criticism from some educators. One important concern is that the entertaining style of the show will lead to increased boredom in school. Contrary to their belief, however, ETS researchers found that teachers rated frequent viewers of "Sesame Street" as performing better in school and as having a more positive attitude toward learning.¹⁰

Another concern of "Sesame Street" critics is that the fast pace of the show may encourage an impulsive learning style and make it difficult for children to attend to tasks requiring sustained effort. Literature on the effects of modeling contradicts this viewpoint, however, and suggests that, while children can be trained to become more careful in their responses to problems, observing impulsive models does not affect the learning style of children.¹¹

While the cognitive goals of "Sesame Street" have been contrasted to the social-emotional emphasis of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," the former program does include some prosocial themes. One group of researchers examined the effects of both of these shows on the social behavior of preschoolers and found differences in the prosocial emphases and how they were represented.¹² Although both programs significantly increased the number of social contacts of their viewers, all children who watched "Mister Rogers" engaged in more positive social interactions with others, while "Sesame Street" changed only the behavior of children who were initially low in social contacts. In addition, "Sesame Street" increased not only the children's positive interactions, but their negative ones as well.

As mentioned, both "Mr. Rogers" and "Sesame Street" are targeted for preschoolers. We turn now to several programs designed for children of elementary school age.



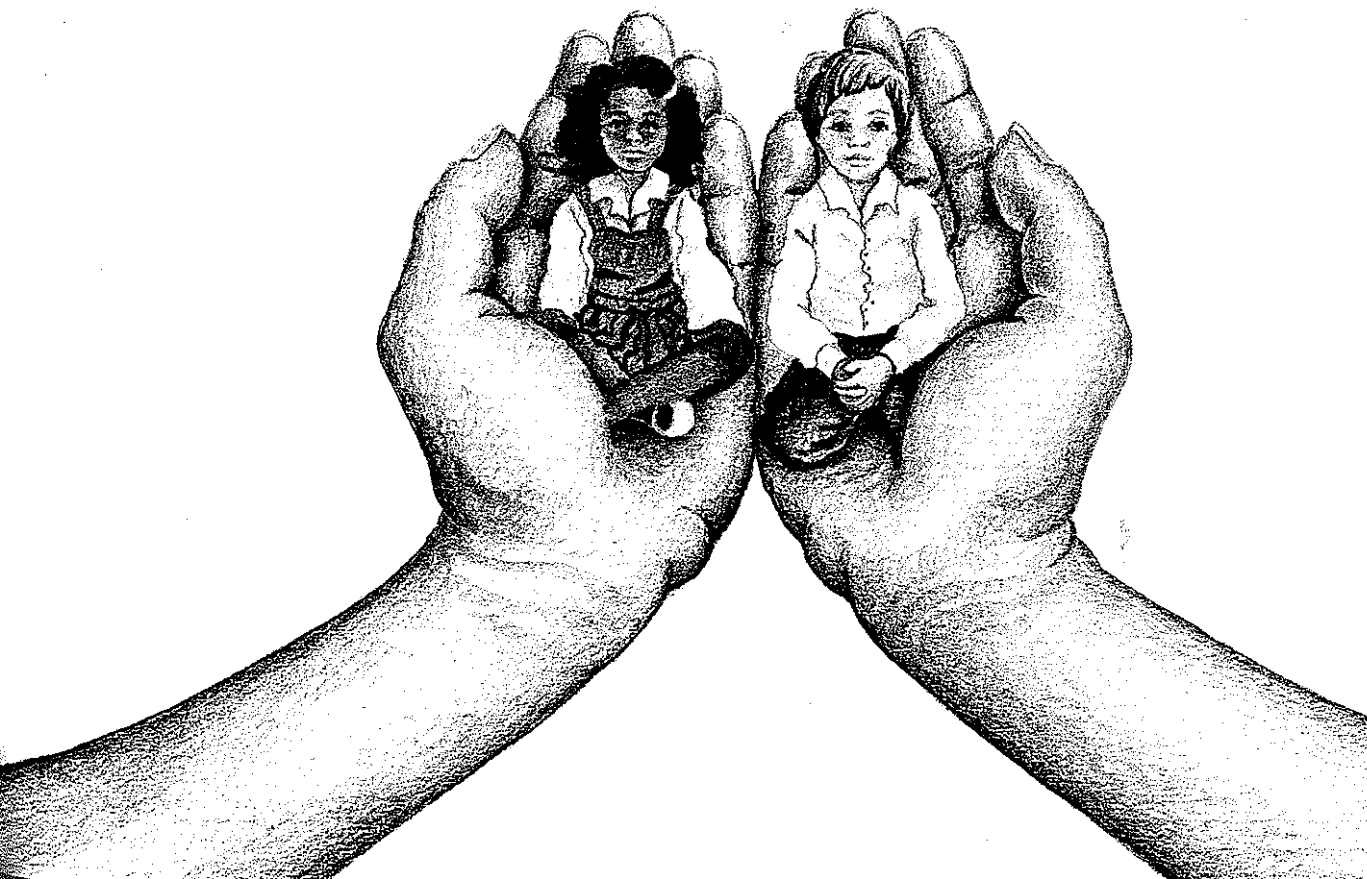
"The Electric Company"—which, like "Sesame Street," is produced by Children's Television Workshop—is designed to enhance cognitive development, specifically elementary reading skills. As in "Sesame Street," lessons are taught directly and are designed to capture audience attention. Both shows have adopted a "magazine format," in which a wide variety of episodes and characters stimulates continual interest.

Word and phoneme recognition is one major focus. Episodes are characterized by word signs that appear on the screen and change to fit the nature of character dialogues and behaviors. The use of behavioral modeling, verbal labeling, and the visual presentation of words is combined with a magazine format that applies the instructional themes to a variety of situations. Such a design has proved successful with preschoolers watching "Sesame Street," but is it useful in teaching higher level cognitive skills to older children?

The answer is, unfortunately, not clear. In an early evaluation by ETS, "Electric Company" was compared with standard

reading curricula in a large sample of first- through fourth-grade classrooms, using a specially designed test called the Electric Battery, plus the Metropolitan Reading Test.¹³ Children who watched the program regularly in the classroom performed better on the Electric Battery than those receiving other forms of reading instruction, but home viewing did not lead to better reading performance on the Metropolitan Reading Tests, which suggests that the program benefited only certain reading activities. Finally, classroom viewers in the bottom 10 percent of the initial reading distribution did not increase their scores; the techniques used were apparently not effective for very poor readers.

Despite these limitations, "Electric Company" does seem to make a positive contribution to disadvantaged elementary classroom viewers, but its effectiveness depends on having an adult present to pay attention to and supplement the media material. If parents can be encouraged to assume this responsibility at home, the reading skills of home viewers might also increase. Until these possibilities can be tested, we can only conclude that the media techniques employed by "Electric Company" have limited success in teaching reading skills to children.



Another production of Children's Television Workshop is "Carrascolendas." On a much smaller scale than either "Sesame Street" or "Electric Company," this show seeks to teach both cognitive and social skills to first- and second-grade Mexican-Americans. More specifically, the goals of "Carrascolendas" include improving both English and Spanish language skills, enhancing other cognitive skills, and encouraging positive attitudes to a mixed cultural environment. These objectives are communicated to the audience through the use of a thirty-minute continuous story line, acted out by Mexican-American adults and children, joined by characters who have no knowledge of Spanish but are trying to learn it. Thus verbal communication on the show is characterized by modeling the use of both Spanish and English for purposes of interpersonal and intergroup understanding.

"Carrascolendas" does seem to be effective in meeting some of its major cognitive goals. A 1972 study demonstrated that children who saw the program did, in fact, improve their fluency in both languages and gained more on an English-language test of program content than did a control group of nonviewers.¹⁴

Whether "Carrascolendas" also encourages a positive attitude toward a mixed cultural environment or succeeds in conveying prosocial behavior, however, has yet to be determined. Some of the problems that arise in dealing with social and emotional content are illustrated in an episode of the show that focused on the resolution of fear. For the first twenty-five minutes of the program, characters verbalized fear ("I'm scared") and acted frightened (screaming, shaking, jumping up and down). In the last five minutes, the fear was resolved when the object was discovered to be harmless. Our educated guess, based on experimental studies of imitation, is that this technique might do more to stimulate fear than to reduce it. Young children have difficulty connecting segments of programs that are separated in time, and they may be more impressed by the long portrayal of fear than by the brief resolution. The most likely message for children to get from such a program is "be scared." Again, research evidence on these questions is badly needed.

"Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids," a program produced by CBS, is designed to teach prosocial messages to elementary schoolchildren. Examples of specific

themes include a new baby, divorce, safety, the cultural uniqueness of Native Americans, and being proud of a father's job even when it is menial. The plot usually involves a familiar group of black children, mostly boys. Themes are introduced and developed with interjections by Bill Cosby, whose messages provide subtle examples of thematic verbal labeling.

Research done by the CBS Broadcast Group attempted to assess whether children were able to interpret "Fat Albert's" prosocial themes.¹⁵ When interviewed, children who had watched the program either at home or in the laboratory reported many of its messages correctly. Although changes in children's behaviors and perceptions have not been assessed, the results of this research are important in that they demonstrate the ability of older children to comprehend complex prosocial messages that are represented and labeled through the media.

The goal of "Inside/Out"—a joint effort by thirty-three educational and broadcasting agencies in the United States and Canada, under the supervision of the Agency for Instructional Television—is to promote the emotional development of eight- to ten-year-old children, with an emphasis on achieving and maintaining interpersonal and intrapersonal well-being. Specific themes dealt with in episodes of "Inside/Out" include learning to identify individual differences in the communication of feelings; recognizing that freedom and responsibility create a tension that is part of growing up; understanding that some forms of "joking" can potentially affect another person's self-esteem; and learning how to cope with the feelings evoked by divorce, death, and moving.

The themes are related to situations both at home and in school and are poignantly dramatized in fifteen-minute color segments. In an attempt to increase identification with and understanding of the feelings portrayed, the episodes are presented through a child's eyes. They are typically open-ended so as to encourage individual interpretation and discussion in the family or in the classroom.

We know of no research on the success of this series in enhancing children's development. Evaluation of the effects of "Inside/Out" is particularly difficult considering the affective, rather than behavioral, nature of the program goals. How does one measure "coping," "recog-

nizing," or "understanding"? Before an adequate evaluation of program effectiveness can be pursued, specific behavioral or attitudinal measures need to be developed.

"Big Blue Marble" is a half-hour series produced by ABC that stresses an understanding and appreciation of intercultural differences. The program, which does not include animation, is narrated by elementary-aged children from around the world and depicts their life-styles and cultural environments.

Last in our discussion is "Vegetable Soup," a series sponsored by the New York Department of Education. Specifically, this program attempts to discourage the formulation of rash assumptions about individuals or groups of people (via stereotyping) and encourages intergroup understanding. Two plots—one fictional and one "real"—are presented in succession. The first employs only puppets; the second is dramatized by real children. Although the characters in each plot do engage in discussion about the themes, their conversation applies specifically only to the particular plot. There is no attempt to label and generalize the two themes through direct verbal means. Considering the subtle means of presentation, it is questionable how well the program communicates its messages.

The themes of both "Big Blue Marble" and "Vegetable Soup" raise important questions as to the effectiveness of these programs in altering the child's perceptions and values regarding the real world. The answers are yet unknown.

Full-length programs are not the only format for educational television. Thirty-second "commercials" for cooperative behavior are currently being made in one laboratory and are being broadcast in some areas. All television stations are required to air a certain number of public service announcements without cost, and these commercials were designed to fit the time requirements of "spot" announcements. Considerable research has been conducted in the development of the prosocial commercials, so that those that are released for broadcast have been shown to get their message across to children clearly and to influence cooperative behavior among viewers.¹⁶



The programs discussed so far have all been designed with explicit educational goals in view. Obviously, commercial

programs designed primarily to entertain children sometimes also present prosocial and educational messages. Examples of helping, sharing, cooperation, and task persistence can be found in many children's programs. One group of investigators analyzed the content of over four hundred children's programs for prosocial themes and found that many of them present these messages to some degree.¹⁷ They have also shown that children are influenced by programs that emphasize helping or cooperation. For instance, children who saw an episode of "Lassie" in which helping was a major element of the plot were more helpful themselves than those who saw another "Lassie" program in which helping was not emphasized.

Whether the educational goals are explicit or implicit, it is clear that we need further evaluation of how effective television programs are in changing the behavior of young children in positive directions; in changing their perceptions and values toward recognized goals; and in helping to expand the behavioral and attitudinal options available to them. Until further research is done, we must depend on the information gained from past studies to guide the production and evaluation of educational programming.

A number of guidelines for portraying prosocial behavior effectively on television can be extrapolated, however. First, prosocial behavior should be followed by positive consequences that are intrinsic to that behavior and would be likely to occur for a child who imitated it. Care should be taken not to negate a sequence of cooperative or helpful acts with a slapstick ending, and the efficacy of prosocial behavior—the fact that it succeeds—should be emphasized.

Although showing the "wrong" behavior in a particular situation before demonstrating the positive alternative is a standard dramatic technique, it may weaken the prosocial message, particularly for young children, who do not connect sequences well. If contrasting behavior is shown at all, the consequences of the "wrong" action should be negative and should follow immediately. A variety of models—both similar and dissimilar to the child viewers and embodying warmth, power, and status—should be presented for maximum appeal and generalization. For young children, warm, supportive adults may be very potent models.

Clear narration and verbal labeling of

action appear to enhance learning and imitation for young children. For older children, explanation and persuasive reasoning about the behavior may add to the impact of the model, but the example itself is crucial. Models in any format should act out the behavior as well as labeling it.

Rehearsal of a program's content may be stimulated by the toys available to children. "Batman" capes and "Sesame Street" puppets probably instigate fantasy play that elaborates on the themes and content of those programs. Toys representing characters and artifacts from prosocial programs, as well as more general toys reflecting a variety of socially beneficial occupations and activities, might stimulate children to rehearse and elaborate televised prosocial behavior in their play.

Some of these principles—a variety of models, clear narration and verbal labeling, and rehearsal of content through related play materials—have already proved successful when integrated into educational programs. In addition, "Sesame Street" has identified a wide repertoire of techniques that increase children's attention and thus aid in the acquisition of specific skills.

Additional guidelines are needed for the evaluation of program goals, however. "Sesame Street" has provided a valuable approach to evaluation that can be adapted to other educational programs. In essence, the criteria consist of: 1) identifying a target population; 2) stating general goals; 3) designing around explicit instructional messages; 4) specifying behavioral or attitudinal measures for assessing change; 5) testing the target population in naturalistic and experimental settings; 6) interpreting the results of the study; and 7) making revisions or maintaining program format and goals based on the information gathered.

Our purpose here has been to examine the goals, format, and effectiveness of current educational programming and to thereby gain insight into some important questions: What are the alternative instructional messages of television programming? How are they best communicated? And how do these prosocial and cognitive messages affect the behavior, perceptions, and values of young children? So far, we have been able to provide only partial answers to these questions. More stringent development and

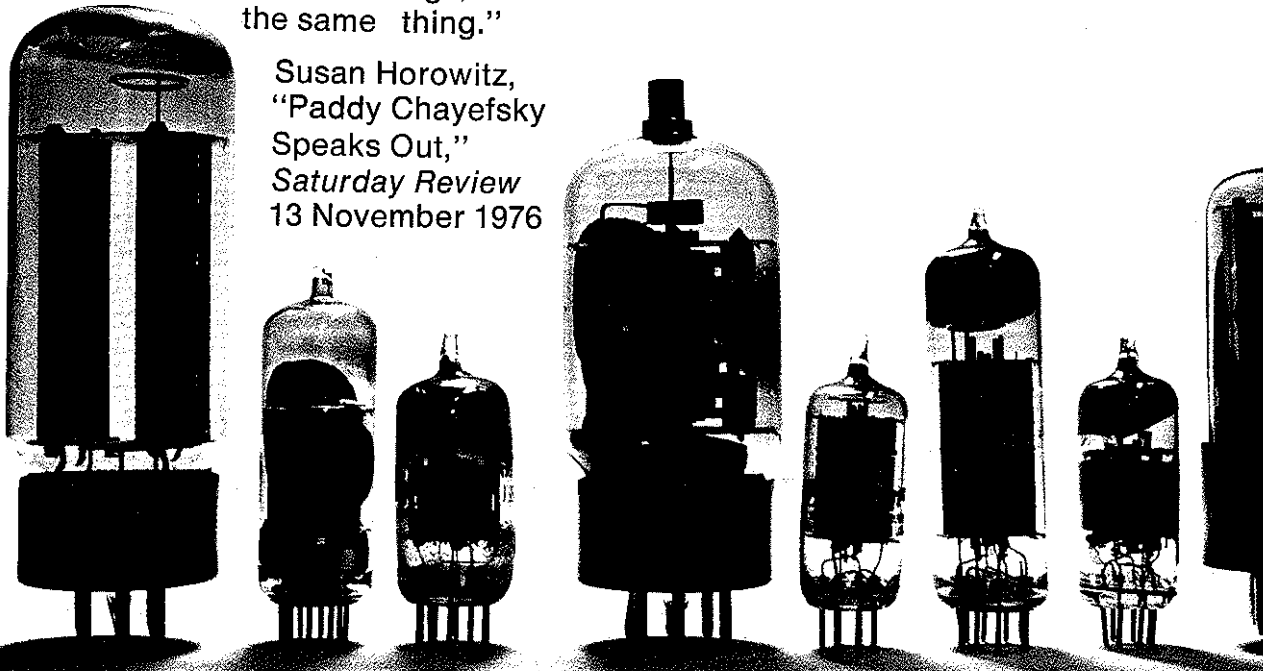
evaluation of educational goals on television will, we hope, bring a more comprehensive understanding of the power of the media.

NOTES

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"Most people in charge of television today still retain a sense of responsibility. They try to balance some sort of noblesse oblige with the profit motive. What happens with the next generation—no longer Brahmins of television, just profit makers? . . . They're no longer programming people, creative people with theatrical backgrounds. They come out of advertising, sales, managing local stations. They're totally oriented towards profits, towards ratings, which is the same thing."

Susan Horowitz,
"Paddy Chayefsky
Speaks Out,"
Saturday Review
13 November 1976



"What is the boundary line of corporate responsibility that separates the vested interests of the next generation from the invested interests of the broadcasting industry? Children have a right to know that there is more to growing up than what they can find in the candy counter, the cereal aisle or the toy department of their local discount store."

Maureen Harmonay,
"Two for the Seesaw:
Broadcast Responsibility
and Children's Rights,"
*Journal of Current Social
Issues*, Summer 1975