Children's Television Programming and the "Free Market Solution"

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This study tests the recent FCC ruling that marketplace forces will provide sufficient high quality broadcast programming available in a medium-sized midwestern city during the 1981 through 1983 period. An analysis of more than five thousand programs, involving more than twenty thousand program hours, during six sample points of two weeks each showed that children's programming actually declined, except for public broadcast stations, where it somewhat increased. While commercial broadcasters presented less children's programming, cable channels did not fill in the gap, as some had expected. Some high quality cable programs for children did become available during the 1981-1983 period, but they remained out of financial reach for many poor children. The marketplace, the study argues, does not favor children.

► The United States is one of the few developed countries of the world that does not possess a national policy designed to provide television programming to benefit its children.[1] Efforts to establish such a policy have been pursued for roughly the last two decades, albeit without success.[2]

Broadcasters have traditionally provided a modicum of children's programs, but few of these efforts have been educational in nature.[3] One approach that has often been suggested to improve the medium's service to children is for the government to institute a quantifiable children's educational program requirement. In fact, such a policy was clearly threatened by the FCC in 1974 when the agency issued a formal call for improvements in the television industry's efforts for children. Specifically, the FCC instructed licensees to make a "meaningful effort" to increase their amount of children's programming and to include a "reasonable amount" of content designed to educate and inform.[4] The Commission was clear in its warning that failure to comply would force the agency to implement stringent formal requirements to accomplish the desired improvements.

An FCC Follow-up

Five years later, the FCC issued a follow-up report evaluating the

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industry's response to its call for improvements.[5] Its findings were unequivocal. Virtually no changes had occurred since 1974 in either the quality or quantity of children's programming provided by most stations. As it had threatened, the agency proposed a rule that would require each licensee to provide a minimum amount of educational or informational children's programs.[6]

Before any action could be taken on that proposal, however, dramatic changes occurred in the FCC's regulatory philosophy. When President Reagan took office in 1981, executive policy turned sharply away from federal regulatory efforts, and the FCC proved no exception to this trend. A reliance on marketplace competition to promote the public interest soon displaced attempts by federal policymakers to prescribe requirements for broadcast licensees.[7]

This shift in regulatory perspective was becoming increasingly apparent throughout the early 1980s in all areas of broadcasting policy. Its clarity was particularly sharp in the children's television realm due to public comments on the issue offered by then-FCC Chair Mark Fowler.[8] Fowler was widely quoted asserting that:

> When there is a decline in children's programming in over-the-air television, the reason is no mystery . . . Other programs may be more profitable or more popular. I don't believe that the FCC should second guess those judgments.[9]

Shortly thereafter, the FCC abandoned its previous position that each television broadcaster should provide programming specifically designed for children, including educational content, as part of its obligation to serve the public interest. A new stance emerged which held that technological advances, such as the increasing availability of cable television and video-cassette recorders, would provide a "free market solution" to the scarcity of programming for children.[10]

Because children's programming could be obtained through these alternative sources, the Commission decided, a broadcaster's obligation to serve the child audience was no longer essential to the public interest. The proposed rule requiring stations to provide minimum levels of children's programming was discarded.

John Murray and Susan Kippax, "From the Early Window to the Late Night Show: International Trends in the Study of Television's Impact on Children and Adults," in Leonard Berkowitz, ed., *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

[2] Dale Kunkel and Bruce Watkins, "Evolution of Children's Television Regulatory Policy," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 31:367-389 (1987).

[3] Edward Palmer, *Children in the Cradle of Television* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987); Joseph Turow, *Entertainment, Education, and the Hard Sell: Three Decades of Network Children's Television* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

[4] Federal Communications Commission, "Children's Television Programs: Report and Policy Statement," *Federal Register*, 39:39396-39409 (November 6, 1974).

[5] Federal Communications Commission, *Television Programming for Children: A Report of the Children's Television Task Force* (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, 1979).

[6] Federal Communications Commission, "Children's Television Programming and Advertising Practices," *Federal Register*, 45:1976-1986 (January 9, 1980).

[7] Richard Wiley and Richard Neustadt, "U.S. Communications Policy in the New Decade," *Journal of Communication*, 32(2):22-32 (Spring 1982); Willard Rowland, "The Further Process of Reification: Continuing Trends in Communication Legislation and Policymaking," in Ellen Wartella & D. Charles Whitney, eds., *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, Vol. 4 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983).

[8] Mark Fowler, "Broadcast Unregulation in the 1980s," *Television Quarterly*, 19(1):7-30 (1982); Mark Fowler, "Children's Television and the FCC," Invited Address before the Arizona State University (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, February 11, 1983); Mark Fowler and Daniel Brenner, "A Marketplace Approach to Broadcast Regulation," *Texas Law Review*, 60:207-257 (1982).

[9] Mark Fowler, "Children's Television and the FCC," Invited Address Before the Arizona State University (Washington, DC: Federal Communications Commission, February 11, 1983), pp. 6-7.

[10] Federal Communications Commission, "Children's Television Programming: Report and Order," *Federal Register*, 49:1704-1727 (January 13, 1984).

Looking Ahead

Interestingly, the FCC ruled prospectively in this case. Little evidence was cited to indicate that children's program content was actually available to any substantial degree through alternative sources at the time the Commission issued its decision. Rather, the agency based its ruling primarily on broad national trends in the growth of these new technologies, implicitly assuming that such growth would generate service of benefit to children.

The purpose of this study is to map trends in the types and amount of children's programs available from broadcast and cable sources in a given community. These trends were observed during an important period of growth and change in U.S. television, 1981 through 1983. They reflect the performance of the free market in providing children's programming at a time of rapid expansion of cable television.

Two types of questions arise concerning the FCC's "free market solution" to the shortcomings in broadcasters' service to the child audience. First, did commercial broadcasters maintain or change the amount of children's programming, particularly educational programming, during the transition to a policy of deregulation? Access to cable or other sources of children's programming may not be a viable option for many in society, especially those in the lower socioeconomic groups, who arguably have the greatest need for educational enrichment. For this group, availability of children's educational programs on the broadcast airwaves is especially important. If, as the FCC has argued, cable and other alternative technologies provide a greater amount and wider variety of children's programs, what has this development meant for traditional over-the-air broadcasters?

The second issue involves assessment of the actual amount and types of children's programming provided by cable television. There is scant empirical support for the assertion that cable programming serves the needs of children better than traditional broadcasting. One analysis of 1983-1984 program offerings[11] reported substantial amounts of children's programs on cable channels, but this study suffers from two important limitations. First, it employed a rather generous definition of what material constituted "children's programming," including in its measure such content as all G-rated motion pictures. Second, it surveyed the maximum possible programming available nationally via all major cable services without regard to what sub-set of these would actually be available in a typical community.

This study addresses these shortcomings by analyzing the children's program content provided in a medium-sized midwestern city on both cable and traditional over-the-air channels. Cartoons, educational programs, and other children's content were tallied in 15-minute units. These data provide an empirical basis for measuring the extent of children's programming delivered in a given market, and thus offer a specific test of the efficacy of the "free market solution" for insuring adequate service to children.

[11] Michelle Siemicki, David Atkin, Bradley Greenberg and Thomas Baldwin, "Nationally Distributed Children's Shows: What Cable TV Contributes," *Journalism Quarterly*, 63:710-718, 734 (1986).

Method

Sample. Programs listed in the television and cable guides for all available channels in a midwestern city (population of 115,000; the 59th largest market nationally; Arbitron ADI market size range of 125-150) during April and October of 1981, 1982, and 1983 were included in the sample. Cable television services had been introduced in this area in January 1981. Every program listed in the guides from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. was coded.[12]

To establish reasonably representative and statistically stable estimates of the distributions, two consecutive weeks of programming were sampled at each of the six data collection points. A total of 5,072 program titles were coded during the 20,576 hours of television sampled.

Representativeness. Channels available in this area through broadcast or cable included two affiliates for each of the three commercial networks,[13] two public broadcasting affiliates, two independent commercial stations (one local, the other WTBS — Atlanta), and four special interest cable stations that are commonly available to cable subscribers nationwide: Cable News Network (CNN), Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN), Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), and USA Network (USA). Nickelodeon, a cable channel carrying primarily children's programs, was not available in this market. This was not unusual as less than 25% of U.S. television households had access to this service.[14] The premium cable services HBO and Cinemax were offered throughout the study, while The Disney Channel became available only during the sixth occasion of measurement.[15]

Measures. The program categorization system was developed for a longitudinal investigation of the early development of television viewing patterns. Each program was classified on three dimensions: (a) *intended audience*: children or general audience; (b) *purpose*: educational/informative (designed to educate, teach a skill, convey useful information about real-world events, or convey explicit moral or social messages) or noninformative (primarily entertainment); and (c) *presence of animation*: fully animated, partially animated, or nonanimated.

Trained researchers rated the programs on the basis of information from television and cable guides and familiarity with the programs. Raters used a manual containing definitions of each dimension of the program categorization system together with examples of each type of program.[16] Raters independently coded all programs with which they were familiar. Programs that could not be coded on all three dimensions by one rater were evaluated by a second or third rater. The proportion of program titles that remained uncoded (i.e., no decision could be reached by at least two coders) for each dimension were: audience, 4%; purpose, 4%; and animation, 5%. Inter-rater agree-

[12] This includes all prime-time hours in the central time zone, where these data were collected.

[13] Duplication for the commercial and public broadcasting networks resulted from the cable operator importing signals from another nearby metropolitan market, a common practice in many medium and smaller-sized markets.

[14] Siemicki *et. al. op. cit.*

[15] *The Disney Channel* had to be excluded from all statistical analyses due to lack of comparable data from the first five measurement points. Its contributions are detailed in the text where appropriate.

[16] Center for Research on the Influences of Television on Children, *Child-Oriented System for Categorizing Television Programs* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1984).

ment checks yielded the following reliability values: intended audience, 97%; purpose, 95% and animation, 98%.

Program categories. Three categories of children's programs were identified, based on the following criteria: the categories formed a mutually exclusive and exhaustive partition of the programs produced for children; they occurred with reasonable frequency; and they were viewed regularly by children. The three principal types of children's programs were: (a) *educational content* (including both animated and nonanimated); (b) *noneducational animated content* (cartoons); and (c) *other children's programs* (i.e., those that fit neither the educational or cartoon genres).

Results

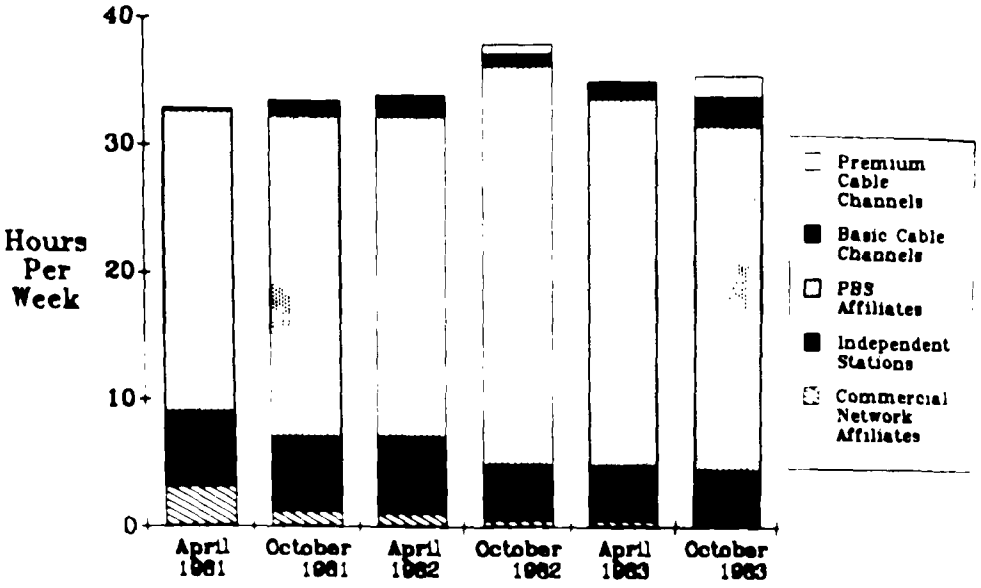
Children's educational programming. The collective data from 1981 to 1983 reveal clear patterns regarding the sources of educational programs for children. Public broadcasting provided the largest proportion of such content, accounting for 55.7% of the total. The more numerous commercial channels presented markedly less educational programming. Network affiliates accounted for 7.4% and independent channels 10.3% of the overall amount. Cable provided about a quarter of the total, although most of this contribution (22.8%) was delivered on premium channels, with only 3.9% provided by basic cable services.

Important changes in the delivery of children's educational programming were observed during the period studied. Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the amount of such content provided by various sources. At the earliest point of measurement, in April of 1981, the average commercial network affiliate provided 3.2 hours of educational programming per week. Individual stations' values ranged from 6 to 0.5 hours per week. Commercial independent channels provided an average of 5.8 hours of children's educational content. In contrast, the two PBS affiliates were the most extensive providers of educational programs, supplying an average of 23.8 hours per week. Basic cable channels provided no educational programming for children in April of 1981 and premium cable channels provided only 0.1 hours per week.

By the fall of 1983, commercial network affiliates had reduced their amount of educational children's programming from 3.2 to 0.4 hours per week. Similarly, commercial independents' offerings declined from 5.8 to 4.0 hours per week. Public broadcasting evidenced a slight increase from 23.8 to 27.3 hours per week. Basic cable, which contributed no educational programs for children in fall 1981 averaged 2.1 hours per week two years later. Premium cable channels increased from 0.1 to 1.8 hours per week, excluding The Disney Channel which only became available during the final measurement period. Disney contributed an additional 21.8 hours per week of educational children's content during spring 1983.

A repeated-measures analysis of variance was conducted using the five station types by six times of measurement as independent variables. Analysis of children's educational programming indicated a significant interaction between station type and time of measurement (F (20,24)=2.30, p is less than .05). Post-hoc contrasts indicated the

Figure 1
Educational Programming For Children
By Program Source



significant change occurred between spring 1982 and fall 1983. During this period, commercial network affiliates dropped from 1.83 hours per week of educational children's programs to 0.67 six months later. During that same interval, commercial independents dropped from 5.88 to 4.25 and basic cable dropped from 1.19 to 0.75. In contrast, the PBS stations rose from 25.38 hours per week to 31.5, and the premium cable channels rose from 0.44 to 0.88 hours per week.

Educational programming: Trends within channel-types. Planned contrasts indicated that children's educational programming on the commercial networks did not vary significantly at adjacent times of measurement. However, there was a significant decline from the spring of 1981 to the fall of 1982 ($F(1,5) = 7.37$, p is less than .05). This difference remained at or near significance through the spring of 1983 ($F(1,5) = 5.51$, $p = .06$) and the fall of 1983 ($F(1,5) = 8.37$, p is less than .05).

PBS children's educational programming evidenced no statistically significant differences at adjacent times of measurement. Like the commercial network affiliates, the difference between the initial spring 1981 measurement and that observed in fall 1982 proved significant ($F(1,1) = 961.0$, p is less than .05). However, unlike the network stations, this difference reflected an *increase* in the amount of children's educational content the PBS stations provided. While means for the spring and fall of 1983 were higher than the spring of 1981, these differences did not prove significant because only one of the two PBS affiliates in this sample maintained the increase.

No significant differences emerged in children's educational programming between any of the six times of measurement from spring of 1981 to the fall of 1983 for the independents, basic cable, or premium cable channels.

Educational programming: Between channel comparisons. In spring 1981 the commercial network stations aired significantly less

children's educational programming than PBS (F (1,69)=97.25, p is less than .05). Commercial network affiliates did not differ from the commercial independent stations or the premium cable channels at this point, but did offer significantly more children's educational programming than the basic cable channels (F (1,8)=5.08, p is less than .05).

Not only did public broadcasting provide more children's educational content than the commercial network affiliates in the spring of 1981; it also exceeded the independents (F (1,2)=42.49, p is less than .05), basic cable channels (F (1,4)=24066.67, p is less than .05), and the premium cable channels (F (1,2)=7144.2, p is less than .05). Independent stations provided more children's educational programs than basic cable channels in the spring of 1981 (F (1,4)=11.66, p is less than .05). However, independents did not differ significantly from premium cable channels, nor did basic and premium cable channels vary significantly from one another at this time.

A significant interaction of channel-type and time of measurement occurred between spring and fall of 1982. Planned comparisons between channel-types were conducted at these points. In spring 1982 commercial networks aired significantly less children's educational programming than PBS (F (1,6)=71.52, p is less than .05). Commercial network affiliates did not differ significantly from independent channels, basic cable, or premium cable at that time.

The difference between PBS and the independents did not quite meet the test for statistical significance (F (1,2)=11.01, p=.08), but PBS was significantly higher than basic cable (F (1,4)=55.76, p is less than .05) and premium cable channels (F (1,2)=23.51, p is less than .05).

In the fall of 1982, commercial network affiliates aired significantly less educational children's programming than PBS (F (1,6)=2307.30, p is less than .05) and less than the commercial independents (F (1,6) =12.38, p is less than .05), but did not differ from the amounts provided by basic or premium cable. PBS provided more children's educational programming than commercial independents (F (1,2)=224.17, p is less than .05), the basic cable channels (F (1,4)=3103.39, p is less than .05), the basic cable channels (F (1,2)=923.46, p is less than .05). Independent channels provided more children's educational programming than basic cable (F (1,4)=9.01, p is less than .05), but did not vary significantly from premium cable channels.

By the end of the study in the fall of 1983, the commercial network affiliates still provided significantly less children's educational programming than PBS·(F (1,6)=33.69, p is less than 0.05) or the commercial independent channels (F (1,6)=17.23, p is less than 0.05). The only other statistically significant difference between station types in the fall of 1983 indicated that PBS provided more children's educational programming than basic cable (F (1,4)=16.56, p is less than 0.05).

Cartoons. The primary focus on children's educational content in this study stems from the value such programs hold for the public interest, and the prolonged policy disputes about how to best encourage their delivery by broadcasters. Still, it is clear that educational programming constitutes only a small minority of all children's television

content. Non-educational animated programming, more commonly characterized by the term cartoons, is much more prevalent than educational material.

Whereas public broadcasting was the major source of educational programming for children, commercial network and independent stations are the primary carriers of cartoons. A repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted with the five channel-types as a between-subjects factor. The amount of time devoted to airing cartoons was the dependent measure. Stations differed (F (4,1) = 3.048, p = 0.064), but no significant effects were observed, apparently due to marked heterogeneity of variances.

Other children's programs. The great majority of children's programming is either educational or cartoons. Content that is neither animated nor educational was relegated to the *other children's programs* category. This material is live-action entertainment for children. This is a very low-frequency variable, and the largest proportion of it is from premium cable channels.

There were no clear trends over time in the amount of this type of programming provided by any of the channel-types. Using the same statistical analysis applied to the other types of programming, an interaction of channel-type by time of measurement was observed (multivariate F (20,24) = 2.53, p is less than 0.05). However, the linear component of the interaction term was not significant, but the quadratic, quartic, and quintic components were. No interpretation of these results is ventured.

Discussion

During the 1970s, public interest groups and the FCC agreed that a shortage of educational children's programming existed. At that time, the FCC threatened formal rules requiring such content to resolve this shortcoming. During the early 1980s, however, the FCC clearly abandoned this threatening stance, finally ruling that broadcasters had no specific obligation to the child audience.

Data from this study provide evidence of the broadcast industry's behavior during the transition to a deregulatory climate. Reductions in the amount of educational children's programming between 1981 and 1983 were observed for both commercial network affiliates and independent stations. Only the network differences proved significant, although the independents' decline was a substantial 31% over the three years studied.

The explanation that best accounts for this trend in programming practices is that commercial broadcasters wish to provide the most profitable content possible, and thus back away from educational children's programs (generally one of the least profitable program genres) whenever the freedom to do so is granted by policy-makers. If this interpretation is accurate, it is interesting to note that broadcasters didn't bother to wait for a formal FCC ruling before reducing their children's programming efforts.

This explanation is entirely plausible, as it was quite clear what posture the FCC would adopt regarding children's television regulation long before the final decision was issued in 1983. In fact, the first significant decline in children's educational content occurred during

the fall of 1982, slightly less than a year after Fowler's position on children's television was established by his public statements. Of course, his general deregulatory predilection was apparent long before and may have speeded broadcasters' response to the anticipated policy change in the children's area.

While these data indicate a marked decline in children's educational programming from commercial broadcasters, it is impossible to prove conclusively that the change was a direct result of the FCC's shifting regulatory posture. Other factors may have also influenced these programming decisions. However, no such factors are apparent and no changes in the general dearth of educational content on commercial broadcast stations have been reported since 1983. Recent research indicates that neither network affiliates nor independent stations provide *any* educational children's programs whatsoever.[17]

It appears that public broadcasting has attempted to compensate for the decline in commercial television's educational offerings by increasing its children's fare. Given the somewhat different patterns observed for the two PBS stations sampled in this study, however, it is unclear how successful this effort may be. Public broadcasting stations have suffered from a declining proportion of federal support monies in the 1980s and this development has limited their ability to provide more children's educational content.[18]

Thus, those children who lack access to cable and other alternative means of delivering children's programming have not benefitted from the FCC's "free market solution" to providing children's programming. One out of every four children in this country lives in a family with an income below the poverty line. They and many others who either live in areas not served by cable and/or who cannot afford to pay the direct costs involved to obtain cable service or other video technologies are entirely dependent on broadcast television. There is little diversity in children's programming from this source; the predominant content form is non-educational cartoons.

A second focus of the present study was to examine what cable television contributes to the marketplace of children's programming. During the period examined, cable's contribution was surprisingly small. A slight though non-significant increase was observed in children's educational programs provided by basic and premium cable services from 1981 to 1983. However, the level of such content available in 1983, when the FCC deregulated broadcasters' obligations to children, offers little support for the Commission's assertion that cable would make a meaningful difference in serving the needs of the child audience.

An important consideration in interpreting these results is that the *Nickelodeon* and *Disney Channel* program services, both substantial providers of children's content on cable, did not figure prominently in this research. *Nickelodeon* was not available and *Disney* was added

[17] David Waterman and August Grant, "Narrowcasting on Cable Television: An Economic Assessment of Programming and Audiences," Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Montreal (May, 1987); Ellen Wartella, Katherine Heintz, Amy Aidman and Sharon Mazzarella, "Beyond Television: A Case Study of Cable and Videocassettes for Children in One Community," *Communication Research* (in press).

[18] Aletha Huston, Bruce Watkins and Dale Kunkel, "Public Policy and Children's Television," *American Psychologist*, 44:424-433 (1989); Bruce Watkins, "Improving Educational and Informational Television for Children: When the Marketplace Fails," *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 5:345-381 (1987).

only during the end of the study. Had these services been available, the findings would no doubt have differed somewhat. But it is important to note that not all of the program services available nationally reach all segments of the population. The channel capacity of most local cable systems is far exceeded by competing program services. During the time of this study, most cable systems did *not* include either of these program services, so the absence of *Nickelodeon* and *Disney* does not render this study's findings atypical.

This research suggests that the "free market solution" to the paucity of educational children's programming will not prove an effective remedy to this long-standing problem. In fact, the FCC's policy of relying on non-broadcast services to meet the needs of children may well contribute to a reduction in many children's access to educational content by reducing its availability over the broadcast airwaves. You cannot see what you cannot pay for. That is also a rule of the market place.