

Childhood obesity, poor attention spans, low literacy levels and increased credit card debt are just a few of the accusations levelled at TV and its effects on this generation. But what is the truth? What is the research telling us and how can we turn this situation around to benefit our children? Television, film and digital technologies are powerful vehicles that provide constant messages about culture, community values and identity. How do teachers and parents use these vehicles for positive development and discernment about what, who, how and why the messages are conceived and delivered. All curriculum areas are responsible for literacy and married with multi-modal approaches, schools can educate students to be critical and discerning consumers of the messages that the media present.

Presenter:

DEBORAH COHEN

Education Manager

Australian Children's Television Foundation

Deborah is responsible for the development of the ACTF's educational resource packages and the Learning Centre materials. She has over 30 years experience in education, with many of those as a curriculum officer; writing and developing education resources, providing professional development and curriculum implementation.



The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) is a non-profit government funded organisation that aims to enrich young Australian's lives through the production of engaging and educational media. Established in 1982, the ACTF is recognized as Australia's premier producer of quality children's television and creator of innovative educational resources for teaching.

All ACTF programs have been developed in close association with curriculum and child development experts so that, within their entertaining content and style, the best educational principles and learning opportunities are embedded. The programs are all available on DVD & video, most with accompanying books and teaching resources.

The television programs, teaching kits and Kahootz, a creative interactive multi-media program are used widely in educational settings and are supported by an extensive education program in media literacy. The Australian Children's Television Foundation's free on-line resources for schools.

Television is neither good nor bad for children, but its impact is complex in the way it affects children's knowledge, beliefs and values. Although children rarely seek out 'educational' content, they can derive both pleasure and learning from programmes which combine both elements.

(Dr. Kaoruko Kondo, *Can Television be good for Children?*, University of Westminster, The Communication and Media Research Institute)

Background

In the last couple of decades the landscape of communication technologies has radically changed, and Australian children now inhabit a 'media-rich' environment of multi-channel television, mobile phones, the internet and computer games. According to the recent Australian Communications and Media Authorities' (ACMA) 2007 research audit,

- 21% of the total population of Australia was comprised of children aged 0-14yrs
- 92% of children (5-14 yrs) has access to a computer
- 65% have access to the internet
- 4.34 million are broadband subscribers (59% of total internet subscriber base)
- 37% of parents reported that their children (5-14 yrs) had a mobile phone, and 74% of its usage was for text messaging

This introduction of new technologies brings with it new sets of skills and knowledges that children need to be competent with so that they can traverse the '*information revolution*' they were born into. The internet and the text message have replaced past communication systems and it is rare that children do not engage with digital communication. How they learn in, through and about these technologies is very different from the past. For most, they were not formally instructed how to use the 'bits and pieces of technology', they 'play' and deconstruct to understand the mores and modes of delivery before reconstructing this knowledge for other platforms and newer upgrades. For most, they instinctively understand the codes and conventions of the system and are not frightened to make a mistake as very few adults actually know about this 'stuff'. Their friends help through online communication and those friends probably got assistance from their friends or older siblings....and the knowledge was passed from friend to friend as '*cultural currency*'...

They must navigate their way through ATMs, taxation forms, popular fiction, advertisements, talk shows, cartoons, sports broadcasts, and, increasingly, video games, internet web pages and hotlinks. In other words, young people have to learn to cope – with some degrees of critical discernment – with virtually infinite range of spoken, written and electronic texts on a daily basis. This is not negotiable, nor is it something that is best delayed until people leave school, nor is it something that we can make 'go away' by ignoring or denying it. Nor is it something that will magically 'learn to do' if we just give them rudimentary basic decoding or spelling skills. These are the facts of literate life in information-based, multi-mediated societies.

Education Queensland's Literate Futures Strategy, 2004

Children do not perceive this learning and adopting of digital technologies including television in the same way that adults do. They develop screen-visual skills step by step in line with their cognitive development. Age and linguistic maturity determine how a child will respond to and engage with TV and digital technologies. It is incumbent upon us as parents and educators to understand how they perceive the world and support them in this understanding.

Children can learn skills from popular culture (e.g. Pokemon) such as how to behave, what to want and to feel and how to respond (p. 28). This type of learning is distinguished from 'official' educational knowledge. Viewed from this perspective the 'learning' that takes place via television makes it one of the major players in the socialization process alongside more

traditional socializing agents such as the family, school and peer groups (Signorielli & Morgan 2001: 333), reflecting society's values and culture (Takanishi 1982: 99).

Television remains the most popular and accessible medium for children who regard it primarily as a source of entertainment (Buckingham, 1996: Livingstone 2002). Many parents often see media, particularly for young children, as an important educational tool that can assist children's intellectual development (Rideout *et al* 2003: 12). In a recent American study, only 38% of parents believed that television mostly helped children's learning, but they were relieved to make use of media, because they saw advances in the educational quality of media content (Kaiser Foundation: 2006: 32).

Understanding what children can and cannot do with television and how they perceive it is therefore essential for examining how it impacts on their lives. As children acquire more experience of television, their ability to comprehend its content and translate those meanings into learning increases.

The 2007 ACMA research audit, found

- 0-14 yrs constituted 13% of the Free to Air (F-T-A) audience, in 2001 it was 15%
- 0-14 yrs spent an average of 2 hrs 22 mins per day watching F-T-A TV in 2006, this was a decrease from 2001 (2hrs 50mins per day)
- Peak viewing times on commercial F-T-A for 0-14yrs is 7.00-8.00pm daily with an audience of approx. 500,000. C classified programs aired at 4.00-5.00pm draw only 80,000 viewers
- Week days between 7.00-9.00am, children constitute 15% of the viewing audience. This is higher on the weekends (30%)

The findings highlight a distinct need to program quality TV programs for children in the key viewing times. Children's TV programs need to be both entertaining and educational. They should present opportunities to imagine and examine issues that reflect children's own lives and present possible solutions to problems that challenge them. Australian broadcasters need to program Australian content the users, Australian characters, Australian settings and Australian language. Key to the development of the content is the identification of key Australian beliefs and values presented in life-like situations and authentic realisations.

Many discussions of television's impact on children focus only on its negative influence in relation to violence and advertising, for example, but it is also important to recognise that television can also have a positive impact.

Television is not a 'one-eyed monster' lurking impishly in the corner of the living room, kitchen or bedroom waiting to exert an evil influence over young members of the household. It is a channel through which a range of entertainment, drama and learning can be obtained and experienced and increasingly these days it is under the control of the viewer (Gunter and McAleer, 1997: xii-xiii).

By the very nature of the content broadcast on television, children are exposed to the good and evil of society. But how do children respond to these images and ideas? Is TV responsible for society's moral and physical decay? Catherine Lumby and Duncan Fine in their book, *Why TV is good for Kids*, write, "The problem with moral panics is that they distract people from the real issues and real solutions by suggesting that things like drug abuse, violence or child neglect are the result of a single monolithic external cause like television, Muslims or rap music. But the root causes of social ills are complex – they do not fit neatly into a headline or a fifteen second news grab, and they certainly won't be solved by simplistic blame shifting".

Effects of advertising

ACMA's research paper particularly looked at the effects of advertising on children and the contribution of this advertising to obesity among Australian children.

The ACMA review found that

- children's ability to understand the persuasive intent of advertising develops progressively and that cognitive abilities, particularly in those children less than 11 years of age, are not fully formed. Young children cannot differentiate between program content and advertising
- Both animated and real-life characters draw children's attention to advertising and are positively associated with memory and attitudes toward products advertised
- Children are exposed to significant amounts of television advertising of High Fat, Sugar & Salt (HFSS) foods (43% of Ads are for HFSS)
- Research evidence establishes a small or modest relationship between TV viewing (as distinct from TV advertising) and obesity in children and teenagers. While TV viewing is a sedentary activity, studies indicate that the association between TV and childhood obesity is not simply due to inactivity, but also relates to increased energy intake associated with TV viewing. However, the relative contribution of advertising, snacking and other factors to increased energy intake was not isolated.
- Repetition and Premium offers (eg. collectables) work to attract children's attention and memory, generating interest in the product and driving demand of HFSS foods. Pester power can also attract young consumers
- Interactive media is becoming increasingly popular as a means of advertising to children
- Media literacy is valuable to educate children about the effects of advertising. It is most effective when reinforced by parental support.

The research study was conducted by Dr Jeffrey E Bland and found that there were no significant links between TV watching and obesity. These findings echoed much of current data provided by both the UK and USA. Socio-economic circumstances of families contributed much more to obesity than TV or advertising. In fact children who are very sporting, active and fit were also high users of technology products. The key issue here is what are the foods that children consume and what parental supervision is provide to educate children about correct eating.

Research evidence demonstrates that cognitive development mediates children's understanding of television advertising and their response to advertising. Other factors, such as parental intervention, media literacy, consumer experience and program/advertisement separators each play a role in helping children understand television advertising directed to them. Studies indicate that between ages 6 to 11 years children begin to develop the ability to think sceptically about advertising and TV program, but may not respond critically without being prompted to think about intent and appeals.

Pro-social television

Compared with younger children, older children prefer more complex programmes including drama, and programmes that feature verbal humour and relationships, which means that

they also become more drawn to adult programming. Likewise there is very little research on children under 3 years, partly because of the difficulties of getting responses from very young children. However, in general it seems that educational television used in the right context can enhance learning.

While there have been many studies of the academic effects of educational television, there have also been studies that show that viewing of pro-social television programmes can result in positive changes in children's social behaviour including increases in 'altruism, helpfulness, generosity, and other social skills (Gauntlett, 2005: 55). Other skills associated with pro-social behaviour include self-control, delay of gratification, sympathy and empathy for others, learning to persist in a task, and reduction of stereotypes. As Gunter and McAleer point out, 'Television programmes contain many examples of good behaviour, of people acting kindly and with generosity. It is equally logical to assume that these portrayals provide models for children to copy, too' (1997: 117).

Parents were given the opportunity to identify characteristics of pro-social behaviour learned from television:

- *maintaining attention, and learning to sit still*
- *being sensitive to the needs and views of others (e.g. manners, sharing)*
- *developing respect for different cultures including their own*
- *to value and contribute to their own well-being and self-control*
- *to understand agreed values and codes of behaviour, how to behave*
- *to have an awareness of behavioural expectations*
- *to understand what is right and what is wrong*
- *to dress independently and manage their own personal hygiene*
- *to understand that people have different needs, views, cultures and beliefs that need to be treated with respect*

(Marsh et al: 2004, 35)

For younger children in particular pro-social concepts of fairness, equality and taking other people's views into account take time to develop, and are influenced more by family and community than television (see Davies, 1989: 161). Television can have socially desirable effects, but there is a need for more research to find out how this works and what type of content works best.

For children, television is "good" when it is engaging, action packed, funny, and above all, entertaining' (Hill, 2004: 183).

According to Huntemann and Morgan the media play an important role in the process of identity development, through the establishment of role models, and this shapes what children think about the world and how they perceive themselves in it (2001: 309). Children can develop a sense of themselves through the media, which offers a way of forging relationships with family members and peers (Marsh, 2005: 12).

Dramatic characterisations and plots can show children how to deal with other people, solve personal problems, make friends and get on in life (Gunter & McAleer, 1997: 20).

According to Buckingham this process of engaging in critical viewing practices is part of the process in which they construct their own identities:

...children inevitably become aware of critical perspectives on the media as part of their everyday experience. Judgements about whether television is or is not 'realistic', for example, are part of the stock in trade of most viewers' discussions of their favourite programmes. To some extent, this can be seen as a function of children's general cognitive development ...

critical discussions of the media therefore provide important opportunities for 'identity work'- for laying claim to more prestigious or powerful social identities (2003: 109).

Media Literacy

If literacy is changing, in the context of the new technologies, teachers need to find ways to work productively with children to help them become critical users and producers of new texts and literacies. For children in the middle years particularly, disparities between home, school and 'virtual world' cultures contribute directly to alienation and disengagement having immediate and material outcomes in the post-school and out-of-school world. Teachers need frameworks for re-conceptualising literacy and curriculum to reflect screen & digital literacies and provide a context in which children in the middle years are able to reflect critically on issues of identity, youth culture, and the role of digital texts.

Critically reading images, music, video and so forth are not all the same as reading written text. The particular way in which hypertext/multimedia juxtaposes text, images, music etc becomes itself a dimension of reading. The elements of multimedia graphic design, completely apart from the 'content', are themselves a way of expressing ideas and relationships. We need to engage in discussions, based on these kinds of questions and approaches, to reflect upon the procedures and criteria by which we make judgements about the relative quality of information.'
Dr Ilana Snyder, *New Literacies for the Twenty-First Century: From Page to Screen*, 2002

To assist children to cope with these requirements, schools need to include 21stC tools, delivered in 21stC contexts, using and accepting 21stC languages making meaning of the world for our students.

'Students are quite comfortable transmitting their own messages through visual, auditory and printed means. Look around and you'll see an increasing use of visual text. Visual literacy isn't a matter of pretty graphics, a few pictures and some online links to make a piece of 'text onscreen' look interactive.....Visual literacy is about the 'blended system of linguistic and non-linguistic sounds, and visual representation of digital and electronic media' and student mastery of this requires 'the so-called multiliteracies that entail the processing, interpretation and critical analysis of online and onscreen sources of information that blend print information with visual, audio and other forms of expression'
Computers for thinking: from theory to practice, David Nettlebeck, Teacher, June 2007

Authentic curriculum should engage students at all levels: strategically and operationally, therefore, thinking/ problem solving/enquiring; creating/inventing/producing and reflecting/evaluating/appraising.. or whatever enquiry approach for critical thinking! It needs to reflect the 'new' culture and mores, be entertaining as well and educating, be ethical and global. It should incorporate multi-literacies where students read, speak and manipulate ideas and technologies. All curriculum areas are responsible for technology strategies and married with media literacy approaches, schools can come close to educating students to be critical and discerning consumers of media. 21stC literacy, therefore, is about giving children access to representations which allow them to understand and use the systems that represent reality – including audiovisual representations and virtual realities.

References

- Australian Communication and Media Authority, Review of the Children's Television Standards (CTS), 2007
- Buckingham, David (1996) *Moving Images: Understanding children's emotional responses to television*, Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Buckingham, David (2003) *Media Education: literacy, learning and contemporary culture*, Cambridge: Polity
- Education Queensland's Literate Futures Strategy, 2004
- Gauntlett, David (2005) *Moving Experiences 2nd edition*, Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing.
- Gunter, Barrie & McAleer, Jill L. (1997) *Children and Television*. Second edition. London: Routledge.
- Hill, Annette (2004) 'The idea of learning: young viewers of reality TV in the U.K.' in Feilitzen, Cecilia Von (ed.) *Young People, Soap Operas and Reality TV*, Goteborg: Nordicom Goteborg University Press
- Huston, A., Bickham, D., Lee, June, Wright, J (2007) 'From Attention to Comprehension: How children watch and learn from television' in N. Pecora, J. Murray and E. Wartella (eds) *Children and Television: Fifty Years of Research*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 41-63
- Kaiser Family Foundation (2006) *The Media Family: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers and their parents*, May 2006, Menlo Park, California
- Kondo, K, Dr., *Can Television be good for Children?*, University of Westminster, The Communication and Media Research Institute
- Livingstone, Sonia (2002) *Young People and New Media*, London: Sage
- Lumby., C & Fine., D, 'Why TV is Good for Kids: Raising 21st century children', 2006, MacMillan Publishing
- Marsh, Jackie *et al* (2005) 'Digital beginnings: Young children's use of popular culture, media and new technologies' Literacy Research Centre: University of Sheffield
- Nettlebeck, D., *Computers for thinking: from theory to practice*, Teacher, June 2007
- Ofcom (2006) Media Literacy Audit: Report on media literacy amongst children, London: Ofcom
Pdf file download from the website is available from;
http://www.Ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/children/children.pdf (accessed on 20th October 2006).
- Rideout, Victoria *et al* (2006) 'The Media Family', in a *Kaiser Family Foundation Report* in May 2006, California: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Snyder , Ilana, Dr ., *New Literacies for the Twenty-First Century: From Page to Screen*, 2002
- Takanishi, Ruby (1982) 'The influence of television on the ethnic identity of minority children: conceptual framework' in Berry, Gordon L.& Michelle-Karnan, Claudia (eds), *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child*, London: Academic Press