



## Rx for Children's Television

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*Commissioner, Federal Communications Commission*

We feel it is essential that commercial broadcasters recognize their responsibility to program for the child audience. . . . We urge that at least half of all prime time be especially constructed with the best interests of children in mind.—*The American Academy of Pediatrics*

Many thoughtful observers of the American scene are concerned, as they should be, about the impact of television commercials and programming upon children. It may help us to see that influence better if we can see it in perspective, as but a small part of the havoc being wrought by the glass screen.

When the Kerner Commission set out to study the worsening state of race relations in America, it ended up devoting a full chapter to the implications of the mass media. The Eisenhower Commission devoted two full volumes of staff studies to its findings regarding violence in the media. The Women's Liberation movement cites television as one of the most potent forces for demeaning women. Senator Nelson recently held hearings on the impact of television drug advertising upon the drug problem. The list goes on and on.

Television is failing each of us individually in its

effort to attract all of us as a mass. This comes about, in part, because the television industry is not even concerned about programming. It is not in the business of selling programs to viewers; it is in the business of selling viewers to advertisers. It is a three-billion-dollar-a-year attention-getting device. There is much less there than meets the eye.

Television is the searchlight at the supermarket opening; the flashing neon around the billboard; the

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topless dancer at the nightclub. Television is the candy the child molester gives your kid. The whole purpose of the enterprise is to hold the attention of the audience long enough for it to be exposed to the commercial. The audience is spoken of in terms of "cost per thousand." Every year we exclaim that the new prime time season couldn't possibly be worse. And then, the following fall, we are always proved wrong.

There is no point in underemphasizing the power and determination of the television industry.

In 1961 Newton Minow, then chairman of the FCC, said to a gathering of broadcasters:

It used to be said that there were three great influences on a child: home, school, and church. Today there is a fourth great influence and you ladies and gentlemen control it. . . . What about your responsibilities? Is there no room on television to teach, to inform, to uplift, to stretch, to enlarge the capacity of our children? Is there no room for a children's news show explaining something about the world to them at their level of understanding? Is there no room for reading the great literature of the past, teaching them the great traditions of freedom?

There was a limited response from broadcasters in an effort to deflect public criticism. But certainly 1970 witnessed a return to "normalcy."

Then came citizen pressure for reform, and things have not been the same since.

- The FCC proposed rules to improve children's TV.
- A special FCC children's unit was established.
- FCC Chairman Burch has spoken out on the subject.
- Concerned citizens sent 60,000 letters to the FCC.
- Broadcasters at least offer promises of reform.
- The FCC is holding hearings on the impact of broadcast advertising, especially on children.

There are other events one could point to—the tremendous work that is being done by Children's Television Workshop, Mr. Rogers, and others in public broadcasting who continue to outshine the

prosperous commercial networks to the embarrassment and, I think, shame of the latter. There has been some good staff work done for the Surgeon General's National Institute of Mental Health panel studying television violence.

This is progress. But there is a difference between progress, or potential, and final results. And we must not be fooled about that. How often have we seen the "reform syndrome": A problem is identified, the public becomes concerned, elected and appointed government representatives are urged to act, a study is begun, or an agency is created, or a proceeding is begun, and then time passes. There may even be evidence of a little reform for a while. But interest slows—except for the representation of the special interest groups hurt by reform. And modest progress, won so slowly at such great cost, is quickly lost.

However, let us assume for a moment we agree that the networks' treatment of our children is a scandal, and that we had the power to effect lasting change. All right. Now what, precisely, would we like to change, and how, and why, and is it politically and economically feasible?

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Programming content is an area that government ought to be extremely reluctant to enter—and one that anyone will quickly find is a quagmire. How does one measure the "quality" of a children's program? And if the judgment is only subjective, how many of us would agree on which programs we would, and would not, permit?

Is it the commercials that bother us most? I have suggested that we ought at least to limit the networks to no *more* commercial minutes per program hour on Saturday morning than they use on the prime time evening programming for adults. That might help. But would it make enough of a difference to matter? Such limitations do not affect the content of the commercials one whit.

Do we want to forbid the showing of any violence? Or are we simply concerned that it be shown realistically, rather than as painless fun? Or, on the other hand, would children be unfavorably affected by such realism? What if the problem is that those who write children's programs are devoid of the imagination and creativity necessary to write interesting material that does not contain violence? If that is the case, when the violence is removed the program that remains is even more vapid and mind-rotting than it was before. Maybe the solution is to train better writers.

Action for Children's Television has proposed that

commercials be totally eliminated from children's programming. That also would help. But most of the programs children watch are not "children's programs." If we are really trying to save children from exposure to the televised hard sell, this proposal isn't enough either.

Moreover, any reduction (or elimination) of commercial time does reduce networks' revenues. But it is a remedy that has little to do with improving programming—and may even produce the opposite result.

Can we affect the content of the commercials? Could we ban some products—like over-the-counter drugs, vitamins, and mood-altering drugs—being advertised at all during hours when children are likely to be watching?

I have proposed substituting "institutional" advertising for product advertising. For example, General Foods would use its commercial time to sell children on the sterling moral quality of the corporation, rather than on the energy levels of its latest sugar-frosted, multi-colored breakfast cereal. But that's not a total solution either. Moreover, the public television people—who are now the beneficiaries of those institutional advertising budgets (or "grants," as they like to call them)—are worried lest such a proposal just shift funds from public to commercial broadcasting.

I have also suggested that advertising on television be "factual and informative," rather than engaging in emotional appeals. "Factual and informative" is not a precise standard to apply, but it is no more difficult than "false and misleading" (the standard the Federal Trade Commission now applies to advertising). If the content of television commercials is having an adverse impact upon the American people, why just take an ineffective stab at saving the children?

Let us examine as an example the way television handles one subject: children's nutrition.

*Perhaps . . . we ought to recognize the inherent conflict between merchandising and children's entertainment and education and forbid the networks to do any children's programming.*

Perhaps, rather than encouraging commercial broadcasting to do more and better children's programming, we ought to recognize the inherent conflict between merchandising and children's entertainment and education and forbid the networks to do any children's programming. Maybe someone else should prepare the programs, not at the networks' expense, and run them on commercial television (without commercials)—or only on public television.

Such questions and options give us some sense of the complexity of the task we've undertaken—and

they are in no sense more than illustrative. I am not one to suggest that because the questions are difficult we ought to throw up our hands and walk away. We just work harder at finding answers. But I don't think we should fool ourselves that knee-jerk, simplistic proposals will carry the day.

I can't know what problems concern you most. But let's look at some of the problems I would imagine pediatricians would be concerned with, and see how those problems relate to television.

***The fact is that commercial television is a nutritional disaster for children.***

The fact is that commercial television is a nutritional disaster for children, fostering positively harmful nutritional habits, and ill preparing children for the basic human activity of eating properly. How does this happen?

A few weeks ago a major network ran two children's programs during prime time. I suspect the network was very proud of them, and no doubt should be—they were reruns of Dr. Seuss and Peanuts cartoons, which children find delightful. But the advertisements for the programs included, in the Dr. Seuss cartoon, one for a major cola and another for cookie snacks. The cookie ads were done in cartoon form with rhyming dialogue—a technique indistinguishable from the format of the Dr. Seuss cartoon. Now how are children supposed to separate the cartoon characters of Dr. Seuss from the pitch for snack products? The Peanuts ads were no better. Cake snacks were being sold as the way of dealing with the daily “zaps” of life. And who are on the packaging of the snacks? Charlie Brown and other Peanuts characters.

Others have commented on the reasons for the extent of malnutrition at all income levels in our society.

Robert Choate has testified that “our children are deliberately being sold the sponsor's less nutritious products; are being programmed to demand sugar and sweetness in every food; and are being counter-educated away from nutrition knowledge by being sold products on a nonnutritive basis.”

What about the food-buying habits of those with truly limited resources? Isn't it senseless for government to attempt to provide funds to the poor at the same time that its licensed trustees tell them to use the money to buy nutritionally worthless products?

A similar analysis applies to other issues of concern: for instance, safety. Children learn very little about safety from commercial television. What is the result of children's seeing cartoons, reruns, and regular programs in which characters are flattened by cars, shot with guns, run through grinders, and “in-

jured” in a variety of ways with no apparent pain or injury?

Richard Tobin wrote recently in *Saturday Review*:

A few weekends ago we sat once again in front of a TV set (again at times when children would be apt to tune in) and discovered that little if anything had changed. Murders, tortures, gougings, whippings, brutality of every conceivable sort marched endlessly across the bloody screen. In more than two-thirds of the segments some form of gun or rifle was used or at least displayed menacingly. The catalogue of violence recorded in June 1968 was still approximately the same in September 1971 in spite of all of the fine talk.

I wonder if a child's vision of these human experiences is really the vision their parents would want them to have.

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Finally, there are the moral dangers from watching television. The Congress has recently considered the establishment of a new program in child development by the federal government. Can't commercial television be induced to start contributing to child development education, not only for children but for parents as well?

John Charles Condry, a developmental psychologist at Cornell University, has written:

What are we to say to future generations when they grow older and look back on their childhood? Are we to admit that with an opportunity to teach, inform, delight, and entertain unparalleled in the history of man, we choose to fill their minds with pap? Are we to say that the short-term gain of a few selected businesses was more important than the intellectual development of an entire nation of children? Are we to admit that knowing better and having the resources and ability we lacked the will? God help us if this is our answer, because it is the response of a civilization careless and contemptuous of its future. It is the response of a society too weak and witless to survive.

It is not difficult to get discouraged. But consider some of the changes that have occurred.

It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of

the Children's Television Workshop, with *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, and of Fred Rogers in his *Neighborhood*. It is important to have a benchmark and standard in any endeavor, although it is tragic, in this instance, that it was not forthcoming from the richly endowed commercial networks.

In its section on mass media, the 1970 White House Conference on Children opened with a quotation from the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, and went on to say:

By 1970 these demands [for high quality programming] remain unmet. . . . Real improvement has yet to appear on the television screen.

The 1970 Conference made a number of recommendations, including some to the FCC, and proposed the establishment of a National Children's Media Foundation. It is also important to recognize the efforts of numerous local groups. Parents everywhere are thinking about children's programming, meeting with station managers and program producers, and trying to develop programming that will serve the needs of parents and children alike.

The networks *have* made some changes in their programming. NBC has *Take a Giant Step* and *Barrier Reef* as well as several children's specials: *A Picture of U.S.*, *The Flower Boxes*, *The Blue Edge*, and *All About Me*. ABC has *Curiosity Shop* and *Make a Wish*. CBS has presented *In the News* and *You Are There*, as well as its *Children's Film Classics* and a number of specials.

The picture I have tried to describe to you is mixed: a general condemnation of the recent past in children's programming, some hope for future progress, and a fairly pessimistic outlook for lasting change—unless those who seek change double and redouble their efforts. Unfortunately, special interests have a way of outlasting the memories of those who seek and promise change.

Sometimes, in my more cynical moments, I am afraid that the broadcast industry believes it can defuse the concerns of ACT, and the others who are seeking change in television, with a little improvement and a lot of publicity—and that in time things will, as they have in the past, return to "normal." The consumer movement must now confront the problem of sustaining its impact. It will happen only if able and active groups aggressively act where they will have the most useful impact.

If the national, state, and local PTA's were to organize, study, petition, and act on these issues, it could be the organization's greatest contribution ever to our nation's children.

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