

**The Age of Television
and the Television Age**

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Nineteen hundred and fifty was a notable year: India was proclaimed an independent republic; President Truman instructed the Atomic Energy Commission to produce the hydrogen bomb, and also, in that year, signed a bill creating the National Science Foundation; George Bernard Shaw died at the age of 94; and after years of debate, CBS was given the right to start color television broadcasts. Though these were the headlines, the mid-mark of the twentieth century may come to be remembered best as the dawn of the Age of Television.

Like many other new times, the Age of Television dawned suddenly, and reached a zenith so rapidly that it is hard to remember what life before was like. In 1947 the medium was a rarity in the United States, and only about 14,000 families had sets. By 1950 five million American families owned sets. From that point on, television quickly became omnipresent in American society. Today over 95% of American households in all sectors of the country—South, West, Midwest, Northwest, and East—and of all income levels, own at least one television set. Now more families own two television sets than owned one in 1950.

This is the Age of Television, not only in the sense of wide ownership of television sets, but much more importantly in

the sense that an entire generation of young Americans are growing up in a time when television is available to them and widely used. Henceforth, practically speaking, no American citizen will reach maturity without ready access to television and all it can bring to him. Nineteen hundred and fifty was a watershed year. Americans who were born, went to school, and became adults before 1950 did so without television being part of their lives. After 1950 we came to take television for granted, and began organizing our lives in both obvious and subtle ways around the reality of the one, or perhaps two or three, television sets in our homes.

The Television Age: Childhood

These first twenty years of the age of television have begun to give us some understanding of how television is changing our lives in almost all aspects—economic, political, social, recreational, and educational. We have become aware only gradually that the lives that have been changed most by television are the lives of children, and that the real Television Age is childhood.

Some parents have recognized—when they have thought about it—that their children's lives are often organized around the television set, and that viewing for many children has become the predominant recreational activity, if not the predominant activity, of the years from birth to adolescence. It is only recently, however, that this individual awareness of parents has been translated into a more general public awareness of the importance of television in the lives of children.

Almost 30% of Americans are under 13 years of age, including almost 12% under 6 years of age, and children spend more of their time watching television than any other age group. Preschool children up to the age of 6 are the single heaviest viewing television audience in the United States, and while viewing falls off slightly after children enter school, those between 6 and 13 are still very heavy television viewers. For

the preschool child, estimates ranging as high as an average of 50 hours per week of watching television have been given. Even if one discounts these estimates, it becomes clear that for young children, the one activity that engages most of their time, aside from sleeping, is watching television.

What needs to be asked and what is beginning to be asked by more and more people is the nature of television's responsibility to children, and how this responsibility can be fulfilled. Will the Age of Television prove to be of great benefit to children, or will it come to be regarded as the dark age of childhood?

Special Needs of Children

Among those connected with broadcasting it has always been assumed that children have special needs as viewers and deserve special treatment. But although this responsibility has for many years been specifically stated by the broadcasters, the public, and the Federal Communications Commission, it has yet to be reflected in the overall quality of children's programming.

It may be argued that the Age of Television has dawned and come to its zenith so quickly in the United States that the laws and regulations governing television broadcasting have not kept pace with need. To the contrary, the laws and regulations are there, but, in the area of children's television most particularly, they have not been implemented.

In the preamble of the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters is included the statement, "Television and all who participate in it are jointly accountable to the American public for respect for the special needs of children, for community responsibility, for the advancement of education and culture . . ." The NAB Television Code contains a section, entitled "Responsibility Toward Children," setting forth eight standards for the programming for children. The first of these standards denotes concern not only for the

content of programming for children, but for all programming which might be expected to reach an audience with a substantial proportion of children viewing. "It is not enough that only those programs which are intended for viewing by children shall be suitable to the young and immature. In addition, those programs which might be reasonably expected to hold the attention of children and which are broadcast during times of the day when children may be normally expected to constitute a substantial part of the audience should be presented with due regard for their effect on children."

Though the Federal Communications Commission has not issued a policy statement with regard to programming for children, several Commission chairmen and members have evinced this concern. Most recently, Chairman Dean Burch emphasized the broadcaster's responsibility to his community and criticized television's programming for children when he said, "Does anybody in this room think that broadcasting has been 100% successful in its attentions to the children of this country?" Further, the FCC has stated that the licensee's programming is to be based upon the needs and interests of the community and developed in consultation with it. "The principal ingredient of the licensee's obligation to operate his station in the public interest is the diligent, positive, and continuing effort by the licensee to discover and fulfill the tastes, needs, and desires of his community or service area, for broadcast service." In further statements the FCC has continued to affirm that broadcasters must plan their programs to be responsive to the needs and interests of all substantial groups in their listening public.

In addition, a recent Supreme Court decision states unequivocally: "It is the right of the viewers and listeners, not the right of the broadcasters, which is paramount."

Thus the right of children to quality programming is both implicit and explicit in broadcasting laws and regulations. The difficulty is that children are not able to petition to have

them invoked on their own behalf. They are unable to form the lobby groups to bring the pressure to which government reacts.

Signs of Ferment

Fortunately, signs are mounting that the importance of television for children will not continue to be ignored in the future as much as it has been in the past. The signs of ferment are present in the Federal Communications Commission, in the television industry, in new programs which have become available for children, and in citizens' groups which are now actively taking steps to insure that more appropriate television fare be made available for children.

In the last decade several members of the Federal Communications Commission have used their influence to stimulate broadcasters to develop and broadcast more and better children's programs. In 1961, FCC chairman Newton Minow said in an address to broadcasters: "No other group of men and women in America will make decisions which sweep with more penetrating impact upon the American mind. Your decisions will affect more children's hours in America, for good or evil, than the teachers in our schools and, I say with some shame, than many parents in our homes If the alternatives [in children's programming] are merely the lesser of several evils, then we are talking not about illuminating the world for children but rather about varying degrees of darkness It is time for you creative television professionals to light a few million candles so that you can take our children out of the darkness." These concerns have been reiterated by present members of the FCC, including the chairman, Dean Burch.

During the past year all three television networks appointed vice presidents for children's programming, stimulated in part by the inquiry of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and in part by a growing awareness

that the public was beginning to expect and demand better fare for young children.

This last year, the Children's Television Workshop produced and aired, largely over public television stations, the program for preschool children, *Sesame Street*. Its ability to gain a large share of the child audience and the great critical acclaim it has received have further encouraged broadcasters to believe that quality children's programming can be both obviously in the public interest and economically viable.

Finally, and very significantly, there is evidence of important public concern for better children's programming. The organization Action for Children's Television (ACT) has emerged as a significant voice for improved children's programming. ACT has monitored and analyzed currently available children's television fare and has begun to develop ideas for standards to be applied to children's programming. Most recently, ACT has petitioned the Federal Communications Commission for rule-making related to children's television in which ACT hopes the FCC will lay down programming policies that broadcasters henceforth will follow.

ACT has presented three primary proposals for improved children's programming: first, there should be no sponsorship and no commercials on children's programs; second, no performer should be permitted to use or mention products or services by brand name during children's programs; and third, each station should provide daily programming for children and in no case should this be less than 14 hours a week.

The Need—Quality Programming and Sufficient Air Time

Compared to past inaction, these signs of citizen initiative, interest by the networks, new children's programs, and FCC encouragement, are all hopeful. But even what must seem like radical proposals as developed by ACT may be very

conservative when measured against the real needs of children. If broadcasting is to meet its obligation to children, what is needed is quality children's programming available at all hours when children are likely to be watching. Children have the right to be served by television when they can view it. This means that a child should have available to him at whatever hour he normally watches television a quality program designed for his benefit: for his education, for his entertainment, for his enjoyment.

It may be argued that given the current structure of television—only three television networks, public broadcasting in its infancy, and the responsibility for programming in the hands of local broadcasters—there is no realistic way to provide alternative children's programming at all hours when children are likely to view television. This is not true.

It has been shown that preschool children normally watch television mostly in the morning hours during weekdays and in the late afternoon at the same times that their older siblings do. School children typically view television between the hours of 3:30 and 7:30, although as they become older their tastes and interests lead them to watch on into the evening hours along with their parents. During weekdays, three hours of children's programming each morning and four hours in the afternoon between 3:30 and 7:30 would take care of a very substantial part of the time that children normally view television. This would mean seven hours of daily programming for children. If an additional seven hours of programming on Saturday and on Sunday were scheduled, the resulting forty-nine hours per week of quality children's programming would largely satisfy the need for an effective children's television alternative.

Some quality children's programming is already available over public television, the networks, and local stations. When all of this is added together, however, it will not nearly achieve the goal of 49 hours per week of quality children's program-

ming. If each network were to assume responsibility for 10 hours a week of children's programming, and the time was divided so that what children's programming was available was not competitive with other children's programming, 30 of the necessary 49 hours would be accounted for. When Newton Minow made his statement on children's programming in 1961, he anticipated the possibility that the networks might divide the competitive disadvantages of children's programs by having each network made responsible for different times each week. At the same time, he also anticipated objections by the broadcasters on the grounds of possible antitrust implications in the proposed arrangement, and he reported to them that such implications had been cleared with the Department of Justice.

If, in addition, local broadcasters were encouraged and stimulated to add children's programming of a local nature, and the hours of children's programming made available through public television continue to increase as they should, even today we could approximate the 49 hours per week of quality children's programming necessary to give children a reasonable television alternative.

But of course there are two separate problems: first, to assure that enough television time is devoted to children's programming to serve the needs and interests of children; and second, to assure that the quality of the programming available meets reasonable standards. A combination of voluntary action by the networks and the requirement that local broadcasters devote an adequate share of their broadcast time to the needs of children would practically assure that enough television time were made available to begin to meet the need. Assuring that the quality of this programming meets adequate standards is a different, but not insuperable, problem.

Here again, previous statements by the Federal Communications Commission give some guidance as to how quality in children's programming can be maintained at a high level.

The FCC has said that it wished broadcast licensees to involve the public in contributive planning. "... the licensee must find his own path with the guidance of those whom his signal is to serve. ... What we propose is documented program submissions prepared as a result of assiduous planning and consultation covering two main areas: first, a canvass of the listening public . . . ; second, consultation with leaders in community life. . . ."

The National Association of Broadcasters has already recognized the special responsibilities of television to children. A great step forward would be taken if the networks were to join with the National Association of Broadcasters in reaffirming this responsibility by appointing an impartial citizens' committee composed of leading educators, creative artists, and concerned citizens to review and comment upon available and proposed children's programming, and to act as the industry's own safeguard for the assurance of high quality programming. This is the sort of device that has been used time and again in various segments of American industry when the public interest was at stake.

It is true that there are difficulties with the idea of a watchdog committee appointed by the industry to help assure quality in children's programming. Cries of artistic control and censorship on the one hand, or of whitewash on the other hand, are sure to be raised. There are also obviously problems in developing a working relationship between such a committee and producers and television directors and advertisers. To cite these and other problems is not, however, reason to stop demanding that the television industry find for itself ways of assuring the public of the quality of its product for children.

Looking at children's television programming from the point of view of the industry's self-interest, there are extremely significant reasons why television should take special care to nurture the young child as a viewer. When those in broadcasting voice their own dissatisfactions with the level and

content of programming which is in apparent demand by the American public, they frequently cite the necessity to appeal to mass tastes—to the tastes of the indiscriminating television viewer who is content with formula programs, reruns of old movies, and inartistically and uncreatively produced products. To the degree that this is true, some responsibility for this unhappy state of affairs must be laid squarely at the feet of the broadcasters. It is the broadcaster who provides the fare for young children. To the extent that the child feeds upon a diet of unwholesome television food little designed to educate him, to develop his standards of taste, to improve his esthetic judgment, and to convey to him the greatness and quality of man's cultural achievements—to that extent it must be expected that this child, as he grows up, will fail to appreciate, demand, and support the creative and artistic aspirations of those in the television industry who would like to see television establish continually higher standards of creative and artistic achievement for itself.

Another important consideration for the television industry is that its economic health depends upon its ability continually to recruit and foster the abilities of talented people, whether they be camera men, directors, actors, producers, writers, or film editors. As the Age of Television has dawned, there has been an exciting lure for talented people to go into a new industry where they may have a chance to live up to their own ideals and aspirations. Should, however, the children of America become disillusioned with television as adults, partly because of the poor level of programming provided them as children, television itself will suffer in future years as talent turns elsewhere for outlet.

To write of broadcasting's responsibilities for quality children's programming is, perhaps, to make this seem a burdensome activity when, on the contrary, television for children possibly offers the greatest creative opportunity, the greatest educational opportunity, and the area most open for experi-

mentation of any in the television field. Comparatively speaking, children are new viewers of television, ready to be enlightened and entertained—their minds unjaded by years of experience with a less than wholly satisfying medium.

While children share common educational and cultural needs, they also reflect the great diversity of the United States, and the diversity of programmings available to them can and should represent the diversity of children and their families. This audience is constantly changing and constantly being renewed so that time-proven programming can be repeated, improving and revising it as necessary to meet changing cultural conditions.

At the same time, a fresh young audience offers a constant opportunity for experimentation with new television forms to better achieve educational, cultural, and entertainment objectives.

Whose Responsibility?

Many will argue that there is no way in which the concept of alternative children's programming can realistically be approached. They will say that past history shows that broadcasters and networks are unwilling to take their responsibilities to children seriously. They will say that the Federal Communications Commission is unable to help improve the situation; they will say that the concept of alternative children's programming is economically impossible. These and other arguments will be advanced as excuses for continued inaction, but none of them are compelling.

First, it must be recognized that the improvement of children's programming is the mutual responsibility of the Federal Communications Commission, the broadcasters, the networks, the advertisers, and the public. It is through joint action by all of these groups that the situation we have had in the past may be changed and improved in the future.

The Federal Communications Commission has open to it

several courses of action which could greatly improve the environment for quality children's programming. Whether or not the Commission goes ahead to institute a rule-making procedure based upon the petition by Action for Children's Television, it could do two other things. It has already set out fourteen elements of programming in a policy statement which it described as "the major elements usually necessary to meet the public interest, needs, and desires of the community in which the station is located, as developed by the industry and recognized by the Commission. . . ." The third element in this statement was "programs for children."

So far, however, this concern has not been reflected in the all-important license renewal forms required by the Commission. These forms, originally prepared in 1927 and since amended, have required extensive information on the part of broadcasters about the amount of time devoted to programming of various types. The FCC could amend this license renewal form requiring the broadcaster to provide information on programs designed for and adapted to the tastes, interest, and needs of children. This simple action by the Federal Communications Commission would clarify the responsibility of individual broadcasters to provide appropriate programming for children in the context of the continual assessment they are required to make of the needs of their community.

In addition, again without new rule-making, the Commission could issue a policy statement regarding children's programming, and perhaps setting specific standards as, for example, that such programming should be developed in consultation with parents and educators.

If the FCC were to initiate these two actions the obligations of local broadcasters to children would be clarified, and the local broadcaster could be expected to find ways to fulfill these obligations. It has already been suggested how the networks could help provide more high quality children's programming by appropriate division of responsibility. Such

action by the networks would, of course, make the local broadcaster's job easier in fulfilling his own responsibilities in that it might be expected that a substantial portion of many broadcasters' programming for children would be derived from network material.

In an environment where the obligation of broadcasting toward children is not well clarified, it is not to be expected that advertisers will be very inventive about finding good ways to support quality children's programming. Many people find institutional advertising much more appropriate for children than typical product commercials. Action for Children's Television has already highlighted some of the issues surrounding advertising on children's programming, and these issues and the arguments advanced by ACT deserve careful consideration by the advertising community.

Finally, the public bears a major share of responsibility for improving children's programming. It is the public's right to be served by television; but the public must understand its responsibility to inform broadcasters of its needs. The work of Action for Children's Television shows that there is a rising public spirit on these issues. The goal of high quality programming for children would be enormously served if more citizens' groups studied the problems of television programming and made their findings known. On the other side, the cause would be well served if the television industry had an appropriate group of its own to listen to these public groups and engage in productive dialogue with them.

Even though steps that are taken now to improve children's programming may not yield completely satisfactory results, they may help to provide the patterns that will provide satisfactory results in the future. Today many communities are served by only one or two or three broadcast stations, and, as a result, these communities have a limited amount of time available for all programming and necessarily a limited amount of time available for children's programming.

The excuse of insufficient air time is already a feeble reply to those who call for more and higher quality children's programming. This excuse will become even more untenable in the future. The advent of cable antenna television, with its almost unlimited channel capacity, provides the possibility that in the relatively near future—that is, the next five to ten years—most American homes will have potentially available twenty or thirty or forty clear television signals. With the availability of an essentially unlimited number of clear television signals, there is no reason why one or more channels could not be dedicated to the needs of children, insuring the air time available, and providing the opportunity for those who want to fill this air time with high quality programming.

If 1950 marked the dawn of the Age of Television, 1975 may mark the passing of network television as we have known it. Cable television with all that it can provide offers American society the opportunity to have specialized television channels to serve specialized needs. In this new era of the Age of Television, many as yet unspoken needs are sure to be defined. Professionals in such fields as science, law, engineering, and medicine are sure to wish greater service from television. Ethnic minorities have voiced responsible demands for improved service. The public needs more and better information about health care, nutrition, accident prevention, and other problems of personal well-being.

Among all these needs, however, the needs of that minority of the American public—children—who form 30% of the population must rank high. The history of broadcasting shows that early decisions have lasting consequences. The patterns of television broadcasting have their roots in radio; similarly cable broadcasting will grow from today's television. The Age of Television is upon us. It is not too late to harness the talents and abilities of this industry to make the Age of Television serve children—those of the real Television Age.

