

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION PROGRAMMING IN NEW ZEALAND:

Like the kiwi an endangered species?

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ABSTRACT

Communicating to children through the medium of television would seem to be well served in New Zealand's commercial and deregulated broadcasting environment. Deregulation has seen an extension of broadcasting minutes each day in the children's arena and the opening up of a second channel in the free to air broadcasting of children's programmes. It can be argued that this increase in material will create a healthy competitive environment and an increase in diversity. The funding body, NZ On Air, in its statement of intent, expresses that children's television should promote "diverse, innovative children's programmes that reflect and foster the different expressions of New Zealand's cultural identity and serve the needs of children as citizens, not simply as consumers" (NZ On Air, 2000, pg.1). As much of the current programming funded by New Zealand On Air is of magazine format that is fun, and fast moving the question is raised as to whether the audience is adequately served if content is increasingly influenced by commercial competition. Stephen Kline (1993), in summing up his views on the commercial marketplace and children's television states that "Business interests trying to maximize profits cannot be expected to worry about cultural values or social objectives beyond the consumerist cultural vector that underwrites cultural media" (Kline, pg 350). This view of how the commercial marketplace can change programming implies disregard for the audience needs, and is of concern as children's television traditionally has been an area where the public service values of education, information and entertainment have dominated. Some Audience Attitude Surveys have been conducted to ascertain how programming has been received, and information about audience expectations has been ascertained to shape programming content. This paper examines the assumptions made about children and television as expressed in the New Zealand environment and considers the role Audience Attitude Surveys and children's advocacy groups play in shaping the programming formats.

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Discussion about children and television inevitably conjures up the debate that children are a special audience that need to be protected from adverse influences as well as from their own ignorance and lack of experience. This is counter argued that in a changing world the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are blurring and the role of the media in creating this is a cause for celebration. Most of this discourse

revolves around children's viewing of adult television programmes and the effects of adult themes or violent material on the child audience. In New Zealand, children aged five to 14 are watching an average of 120-140 minutes daily of television (NZ Television Broadcaster's Council, 2003), which is spread over the 24 hour viewing day. This paper analyses the content of New Zealand children's afternoon programmes in 2002, and examines the pressures deregulation has put on broadcasters when competing in a small market where funding resources are limited.

The children's programming environment

New Zealand television was deregulated in 1989. TVNZ was set up as a State Owned Enterprise designated to return a profit to its shareholders. TV3 internationally owned by CanWest became the commercial opposition. The Broadcasting Act set up what was to become New Zealand On Air. NZ On Air now administered the licence fee that had been handled by the broadcaster. With the advent of TV3, the two channels were now in competition for the same resources. In terms of the Broadcasting Act, TVNZ was required to broadcast to children, but it was not incumbent on TV3 to do so.

The rights of broadcasters in the areas of children's needs are governed by Section 36 (c) (ii) of the Broadcasting Act of 1989, where NZ On Air is required to, "ensure the range of broadcasts is available to provide for the interests of children". Funding of programmes is provided mainly by NZ On Air. Their *Children's Programming Strategy* states that

"NZ On Air will take a leadership role in providing a safe, quality programming environment for New Zealand children of all ages by promoting an increasing number of diverse, innovative children's programmes that reflect and foster the different expressions of New Zealand's cultural identity and serve the needs of children as citizens, not simply as consumers." (NZ On Air, 2000. pg 1)

NZ On Air's intentions are encouraging but how quality-programming criteria can be achieved is not specified nor how programming will foster cultural identity or citizenship. However, it is implied that programmes should inform and educate. The programming strategy also endeavours to promote an effective relationship between broadcasters, producers and themselves. The child audience is not defined, but the Broadcasting Standards Authority (2003.pg 7) states, "a child means a boy or girl under the age of 14 years".

Promoting diversity is problematic, as commercial decisions tend to promote homogeneity and not innovation. A definition of diversity (Norris, P., Pauling, B., Lealand, G., Huijser, H., Hight, C. 1999), describes it as demonstrating that all genres, as well as small groups and minorities be represented. Diversity of production and diversity of ownership would encourage competition and this would reflect in programming.

Independent production opportunities have increased with deregulation, as only TVNZ's *WNTV* programme is made in house. The high costs of local children's production has shown that specialised programmes have been replaced by magazine-type formats and imported animations. With regard to "quality", in discussion with

independent producers (Personal communication Nov 2002, May 2003) a producer for TV3 stated that there were no specific quality guidelines. They would discuss the programme content with the commissioner and as they had built up a relationship over time, could resolve what was necessary. This often resulted in “second guessing” requirements when pitching a new concept. A programme only received funding once a broadcaster had agreed to screen it, the broadcaster and NZ On Air acting as gatekeepers in any funding round as the broadcaster also had to finance the broadcast and seek advertising to offset this.

Independent producers followed NZ On Air and the BSA’s, Guidelines on Children’s Interests (BSA 2003, pg.5) for codes of practice. An independent producer for TVNZ also stated they had a longstanding relationship with the commissioner and through discussion would for example “up-age” the content. As TVNZ responded to ratings, if ratings were down they had to make changes to the programme. Ken Burns head of Children’s Programmes TV 3 (Personal communication, Sept. 2002) explained that from their perspective ratings were nominal and they could as easily show infomercials in the afternoons, but they regarded children’s programming as an important area. The current rating system canvasses a very small group to determine children’s ratings. As the measurement of sub-population groups of which children aged 5 –14 years are part of, Geoff Lealand (1998) describes how this could consist of a group of between 13 – 19 children, making this an unreliable measure. To determine how children were receiving their programme the producer of *Sticky TV* organised focus groups to find out children’s likes and dislikes. This did not cover the overall content of the programme, only the linking material.

Both TV2 and TV3 children’s afternoon programmes in September 2002, consisted of magazine type programmes. This format was in place throughout the year’s schedule. Advertising breaks of 3 minutes duration containing promotions of toys, snack foods and channel promos are part of the content. Marketers are acutely aware that although children as a group are a potential market, they do not have buying power, but as Buckingham *et. al.*, 1999 explain, they have considerable “pester power” and have an influence on buying choices within the family, particularly when it comes to fast foods and household goods.

Within the commercially driven environment, Stephen Kline (1993) argues that marketers manage their communication with children to promote sales. Television becomes the dominant means to communicate with them and consequently marketers have the power to be influential. The debates on limits on children’s advertising, and violence in children’s programming are a function of the commercial environment that relate to this same issue. He contends that

“The marketplace will never inspire children with high ideals or positive images of the personality, provide stories which help them adjust to life’s tribulations or promote play activities that are most help to their maturation. Business interests trying to maximize profits cannot be expected to worry about cultural values or social objectives beyond the consumerist cultural vector that underwrites commercial media.” (Kline, 1993, pg 350)

Kline’s expectation of marketplace pressure raises issues concerning cultural values and social objectives as influenced by television viewing. Recognising that children

were “being bombarded by commercials”, the NZ Television Broadcaster’s Council (2001) brought in new rules and recommended advertising guidelines for children’s viewing times. The bulk of the material on New Zealand afternoon programming is imported animations, most of it originating from the cheapest market, the USA. David Buckingham (1999) observes, despite the excess of American animated cartoons on British channels, in the UK, domestically produced programmes remain more popular with children than those from the USA, a pattern repeated in many countries. New Zealand does not have quotas on local content, and buying imported cartoons therefore is an economic decision.

Regulations and quality programming

Countries with strong commercial television services recognising the commercial pressures on children have developed self-regulatory policies with regard to children’s programming. The Canadian television industry is built around content quotas, which is applied to all programming not only children’s (Attallah, 1996), and these were devised by the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council code of ethics with regards to children, stipulates their aim is “to provide the closest possible supervision in the selection and control of material, characterizations and plot”(CBSC 2003, pg2,). Programmes should be presented with a high degree of craftsmanship and “should reflect the moral and ethical standards of contemporary Canadian society and encourage pro-social behaviour” (CBSC 2003 pg 2). Canada instigated the V Chip added to all television sets in 1997; all programmes carrying ratings so that parents can control what their children watch.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority stipulates the content regulations of children’s television. As noted by Joanne Lisosky (2001) the initial ‘C’ classification (children) came about as a result of children’s advocacy groups, public interest, and the result of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal’s, (1977) inquiry into self-regulation of broadcasting. These standards are part of the Australian Broadcasting Authority, Children’s Television Standards (2003), which defines children as people younger than 14 years of age. Their criteria for a C and P (preschool) programme is defined as a programme that: a) is made specifically for children or groups of children within the preschool or the primary school age range; b) is entertaining; c) is well produced using sufficient resources to ensure a high standard of script, cast, direction, editing, shooting, sound and other production elements; d) enhances a child’s understanding and experience; e) is appropriate for Australian children.

In the deregulated television environment of USA, Action for Children’s Television advocated children’s television reforms (Lisosky 2001). In 1997 public opinion prompted the Federal Communication Commission to impose the 3-Hour Rule, which requires all commercial children’s broadcasters to offer a 3 hour minimum a week of educational television. Programmes have to be designed for children and have “education as a significant purpose” (FCC 1966). Parents can control television viewing, and as Amy Jordan (2000) describes, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which advocated the V Chip, gained support only by “insistence and assistance” of child advocacy groups.

In New Zealand, the BSA has a set of guidelines on what cannot be shown to children but does not define quality programming. As a body they respond retrospectively on receiving complaints from the public. Children's advocacy groups such as the Children's Television Foundation have succeeded in making broadcasters withdraw alarmist and violent items in their afternoon news updates and the *Making it Happen* (2002) document published by child advocacy groups endeavours to "reduce children's exposure to violence on television, other media and computer games" (pg.9). Implementing this agenda would require TVNZ and NZ On Air to "develop guidelines on use of violence for producers and programmers".

Concerns of New Zealand parents

In the deregulated New Zealand television environment the discussion about violence in programming continues. Geoff Bridgman's (1993, 1995) studies analysed acts of aggression and violent actions portrayed on a variety of programmes across the spectrum. In 1993 he found that 45% of the violence portrayed on dramatic programmes came from cartoons. In 1995 results were more positive, as violence in children's viewing times was greatly reduced. The increased public awareness enabled children's advocacy groups to request TVNZ, in July 1994, to withdraw *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* from the schedule. The effects of cartoon violence is recognised in the BSA's (2003) Code of Broadcasting Practice, Guidelines, 9g which advocates, "Children's cartoons should avoid gratuitous violence ..."

The literature on television's effects supports the negative impact of long-term exposure to violent imagery. Aimee Dorr (1986) in examining the literature confirmed studies on the child's active role in making sense of the medium. She found that observing the behaviour of others influenced children's behaviour and children watching an aggressive film behaved aggressively afterwards. A cross national longitudinal study in USA, Poland, Israel, Finland and Australia (Wiegman, O., Kuttschreuter, M., & Baarda, B., 1992) investigated prosocial and aggressive models in television dramas and their influence on behaviour. This study showed a relationship between aggression and television violence viewing but could not determine that this effect was long-term as heavy viewers watched a great deal of violence viewing and prosocial viewing and these balanced out. However they did find that intelligence was related to both aggression and television viewing as the study showed that the low intelligence child watched more television and had less ability to develop strategies to solve problems. He/she would quickly resort to aggressive behaviour being less likely to understand the consequences of their actions. Barrie Gunter and Jill McAleer (1997) indicate that the body of research on violence viewing also shows that subjective judgements become part of this argument. Whether or not too much violence is present in a programme becomes a matter of public taste and opinion. Values change constantly and what is deemed acceptable changes with it. However this argument also highlights the concerns of New Zealand parents in their objections to violent cartoons as well as other violent acts embedded in the programming during the hours that children are viewing.

Susan Hearold (1986) cited in Judith Van Evra (1998) analysed 230 studies of televisions' effects on social behaviour. Overall, the analysis showed connections between exposure to violence and violent and criminal activity. However, the analysis indicated that the positive effects of viewing were twice as strong and more enduring than antisocial effects. One of television's most positive effects for parents

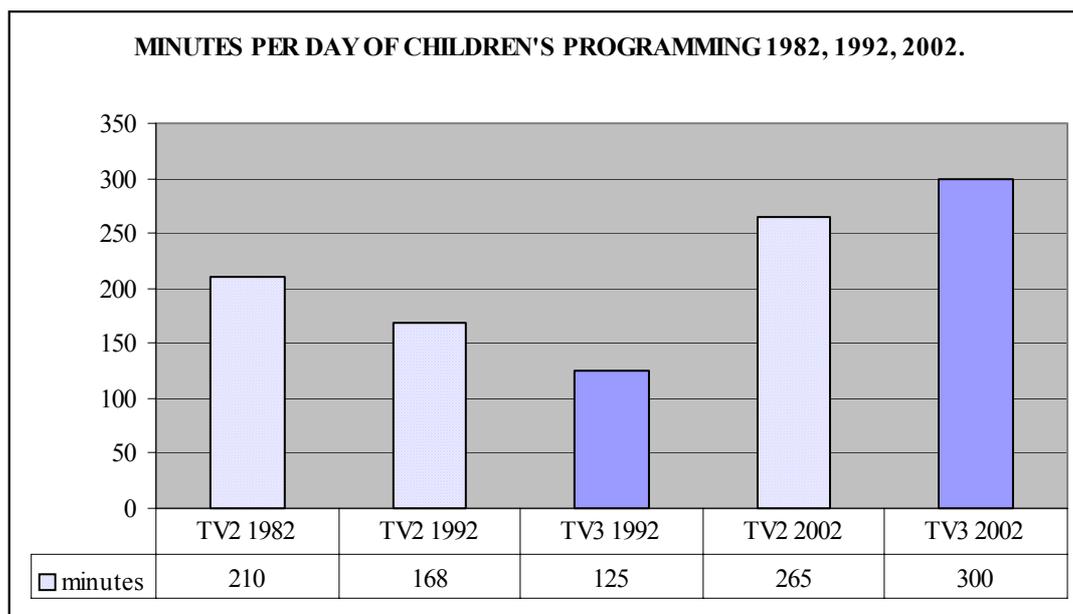
is in enhancing prosocial behaviour and Geoff Lealand (1998b) in studying prosocial effects on pre-schoolers in New Zealand showed that parents and children frequently sat together to watch programmes. This provided a shared experience where prosocial behaviour was reinforced and he recommended that these schedules that were a mixture of local and imported material continue to be funded.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON NEW ZEALAND CHILDREN'S TELEVISION.

Before deregulation, Hal Weston (1982) Head of Children's Programmes for Television New Zealand, reported that programming should reflect the same range of genres as found in the rest of the television schedule, and should educate, inform and entertain. He noted 15 different programme types: pre-school, magazine, drama, animation, documentary, news and current affairs, crafts, natural history, science, story-telling, Maori, including Maori pronunciation and culture, music, puppets and parenting. These were made up of local and imported material. Programming had to meet a wide range of demands made by children's needs at different ages, e.g. Pre-school, 7-12 year olds; 11-14 year olds; young teenagers. Inherent was a policy of prosocial programming for children which encouraged "good citizenship, social and moral responsibility, social equality, respect for cultural diversity, consideration for the handicapped and care of the environment." (Weston, 1982 pg. 95) Other cultures were introduced; a Maori researcher provided Maori programme source material and the hard-of hearing were catered for in the use of signing. The overall aim was that children's programmes should reflect the New Zealand way of life to give children a "greater appreciation of what is here so that they can enjoy it and develop increased pride in their national identity." (Weston, 1982, pg. 95).

A comparison between 1982 and 1992 was made by Jeanette Forbes (1993), who surveyed the amount of New Zealand programmes in 1982 as being just under 74 minutes a day out of a total of approximately 210 minutes. In 1992, as the schedule was not the same each weekday she showed that an average of 74 minutes a day was spread over two networks, making approximately 168 minutes on TV2 and 125 minutes on TV3. She also looked at the genre categories and noted that drama, crafts, puppets, natural history and science had disappeared. Much of the material was New Zealand presenters linking overseas cartoons, and these programmes contained only 10 minutes of New Zealand production. Forbes also interviewed children's television producers who noted that the needs of minority children's groups in New Zealand had nearly disappeared in the 1990's. They felt that programmes had lost their distinct New Zealand identity. Although minutes were increased the schedules were parallel and children could not watch both channels at the same time, so the actual viewing time was less.

Extent of children's programming

**Graph 1.**

In comparing 1992 with 2002, the total minutes each day of children's television has increased on TV2 from 168-265 minutes, the New Zealand content from 10-50 minutes. On TV3 from 1992 to 2002 it had increased from 125-300 minutes, the New Zealand content from 10 -57 minutes.

Children's programming in 2002

Channels	7-9.30am	Time allocation	AM Total	3-5pm	Time allocation	PM Total
TV2						
	<14yrs	125mins		<14yrs	90mins	
	<5yrs	25mins	150mins	<5yrs	25mins	115mins

TV3						
	<14yrs	150mins		<14yrs	90mins	
	<5yrs	30mins	180mins	<5yrs	30mins	120mins

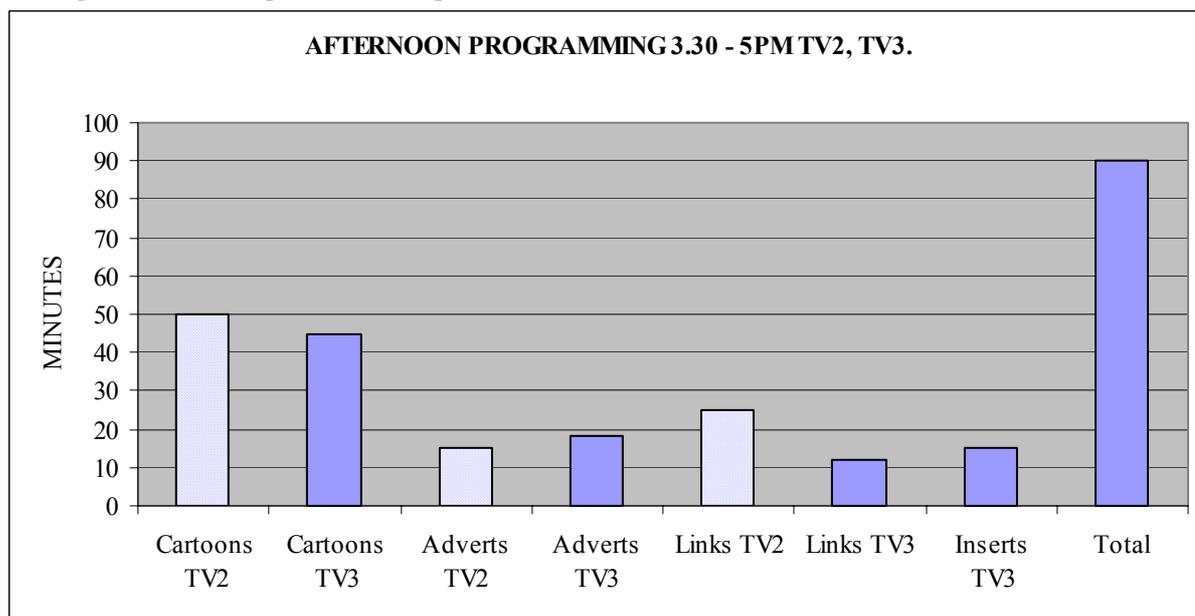
NZ Content

TV2						
	<14yrs	0		<14yrs	25mins	
	<5yrs	25mins	25mins	<5yrs	0	25mins

TV3						
	<14yrs	0		<14yrs	27mins	
	<5yrs	30mins	30mins	<5yrs	0	27mins

On TV2 the programming allocated to children was 265 minutes of which 50 minutes was local content. TV3 allocated 300 minutes to children's programming of which 57

minutes was local content. Local content minutes have increased but this is mainly linking material and pre-school repeats.



Graph 2:

For purposes of comparison the content of TV2 and TV3 children's programmes from Mon 23rd to Fri 27th September and Mon 30th to Fri 4th October 2002 were selected.

Discussion

As these two programmes are the programmes funded by NZ On Air on weekday afternoons they have been chosen for analysis.

TV2's *WNTV (What Now TV)* targets the 9-14 age group. Using young adult presenters acting as characters behind scenes at WNTV television station, a loose narrative links the material. The TV station setting works as a backdrop and a fast paced fun style is created. The 25 minutes of linking material is broken into short segments, 30 seconds to one-minute duration, the local content inserts range from one minute to three minutes, the 50 minutes of cartoons divided into 10 and 12-minute segments. The insert genres categories are natural history; crafts, documentary, comedy sketches; news, sports and popular music. The wide audience age range is problematic as a rapid reading rate is needed to follow some of the information pieces and a high level of concentration is needed to follow the fragmented inserts. The developmental stages of the audience are not always taken into account.

During the two weeks the formula was similar each day with crafts appearing twice in each week and comedy sketches and popular music alternating. Apart from the actors' accents, little information that mentioned cultural identity, or that identified the New Zealand environment was evident. During this period an intermediate school sent in two dramas of three minutes duration. The regional pieces and documentary inserts and interstitials were of varying quality and style; the news of one-minute duration containing three items. These segments take up the 25 minutes of funded material, the rest of the 75 minutes is 15 minutes advertising and 50 minutes imported cartoons, *Rugrats*, *Rocko's Modern Life*, *Transformers* and *Digimon*.

TV3's *Sticky TV*, a game show concept, for 5-12 years, opens each day with an introduction of the presenters, an older teenage girl and boy, and the studio audience for the day. A 10 minute educational piece based on the science/ history curriculum, *Suzy's World* follows. The studio based show starts with a quiz, and cooking competition. Each day carries a three minute informational piece eg., how to scoop up dog poo. Several times in the week a country school area is visited for an insert of approximately two minutes. The programme ends with a Poop Quiz, questions being based on the school curriculum. The winner is gunged with brown slime. This variety type show fills the 15 minutes linking material. The rest of the 75 minutes is made up of 45 minutes cartoons broken into 10 and 12 minute segments. These are interspersed with advertising and five minutes of children's animation, *Animationstation*. The cartoon inserts are *Angela Anaconda* and *Dragonball Z*.

The linking in both productions forms a loose narrative, providing cohesion to a fragmented experience. The longest inserts are animated cartoons of 10 and 12 minutes each. The longest of the links in either programme was two minutes, followed by a cartoon. The advertising breaks contain six to nine product promotions of toys and food plus channel promos. The channel logo and programme titles are displayed in each break, over 20 times daily.

The formula of NZ presenters linking overseas material is now embedded in both TV2 and TV3's productions. However the contributions by children of drama and animation does encourage children to participate and encourage them to be creative. In 2002 there had been no increase in genre categories, and Maori and Pacific content had disappeared from the programming.

Audience research in New Zealand

To find out more about what children wanted from programming, NZ On Air conducted research in 2000, (NZ On Air 2000b) involving 12 focus groups (67 participants). The groups were divided into 6-8 years, 16 participants; 9-12 years 16 participants; 13-14 years 12 participants. In terms of local content the survey identified that children under the age of 8 expressed limited ability to identify what programmes were NZ made. The 9-12 year olds identified NZ programmes and had a high opinion of them. This survey identified preferences for each group ie. gender bias or Maori content. Children on the whole were "satisfied" with linking programmes and enjoyed the comedy sketches and presenters who interacted with one another and the audience, referring to *What Now* a programme which had moved to Sunday mornings in 2001. Parents perceived educational content as being a priority although children stated this as low priority. Some parents felt strongly that, "Maori should be represented more to show we have a bicultural society" (NZ On Air 2000b, pg. 61). Parents felt that values should be inherent in pre-school and teenage programmes and that children needed programmes that "stimulate thought and action" (NZ On Air 2000b, pg 41). Overall this information is inconclusive as the focus groups were small and concentrated mainly on already existing material although some preferences were indicated. NZ On Air identified the gaps as being drama, Maori and animation.

In a further survey NZ On Air (2002), 72 people between ages twenty – seventy took part. Children's programming was discussed by three adult focus groups, so the information is limited. These statements from participants were pre-selected for

publication so they are only an indication of group attitudes. Some parents felt that New Zealand programmes were, “Absolutely crucial. It’s about knowing about themselves, their country, society, ecology, history, who we are, what we do, where we come from. It’s about identity.” (NZ On Air 2002, pg. 102) It was noted (NZ On Air 2002 pg.109) that Pacific content should also be included “to acknowledge the community’s numerical strength in New Zealand”. But parents also felt that inappropriate material was included in children’s linking programmes “Children’s programming in New Zealand is really, really dodgy. If you ask me to talk about three thirty to five o’clock, it’s appalling and I hate the fact that my son sits and watches it. I hate that he sees the violence”(NZ On Air 2002, pg 104).

Specifically as regards overseas content and violence, the following comment occurred. “*Pokemon* and *Dragonball Z* are the bane of parents’ lives – it’s really ugly cartooning – it just revolves around war and fighting” (NZ On Air 2002, pg 106).

Further Research

Further research is needed in investigating what meanings and interpretations children derive from these variety programmes. Children enjoy the fast paced material but it has not been established how well or how much of the informative/educational material is absorbed or retained. It is also not clear that New Zealand children identify with the overseas material and understand the cultural values or the visual contexts represented in foreign cartoon dramas.

Conclusions

Deregulation and competition has increased the amount of local content shown to children but “cultural identity” issues are not being addressed in the current formats. The predominance of imported cartoon material embedded in the local programming links indicates that funding is insufficient and that market forces are forcing programme buying decisions. Kline’s pessimism (1993) is not unfounded as the content is determined by programming made by bulk buying decisions, not consideration for the specific needs of the audience.

On both channels the imported material dominates. The programme linking material is fragmented and becomes of secondary importance. Children’s contributions within the programmes are given haphazard attention and as a result seem undervalued. The repetitive branding of the TV station and the use of the programme logos indicates a strong directive from the broadcasters to convince viewers to become supporters of the channel and become consumers, before becoming citizens.

Quality standards are not specified to programme makers and in viewing programmes the material varies from having high production values involving special effects to being inaudible and incomprehensible. For more New Zealand content to be included substantial funding will have to be provided for programmes that reflect the different cultural and ethnic groupings of New Zealand’s people. Diversity in quantity has been encouraged, as there was more material on air in 2002. In real terms the amount of New Zealand material has increased from 10 minutes to 30 minutes each day but analysis shows an increase in linking material rather than information and educational content.

Attitude surveys are valuable in providing some feedback as to what the audience and parents are requiring but they provide this in retrospect. Advocacy groups too, work to prevent harmful situations, and although essential in providing safeguards to community values, also work in retrospect.

Without established guidelines and standards of quality, the broadcasters will continue to provide their own interpretations of NZ On Air's intentions in their funding brief. Without more substantial funding to provide innovation the audience will be the loser and like the kiwi, children's programming could become an endangered species.

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