

# Tune Into Kids: How Children, Television Producers and Academics Can Further Our Understanding of Children and Their Engagement with Television and the New Digital Technologies

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## Abstract

*This article explores the disparities between the public discourse and recent academic research into children and television, reflecting that positive findings from the research about children's engagement with television rarely surface in the dominant and negative media discourse on the subject. Existing research with children shows how they respond to and engage with narratives in television and it touches also on how they are re-telling these narratives through their access to the new technologies. This article suggests that future research with children could both inform the public debate and further the academic research in the field, producing a broader understanding of the social and creative value of television programs and the new technologies for children.*

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Children are potential winners in the communication technology revolution. The opportunities that new digital technologies offer young viewers to further engage with television content are increasingly taken up by the younger generation. But this is far from recognised, let alone embraced, in the public debate that still sees the 'box in the corner' as a potential threat to our 'vulnerable' children. The longstanding public panic about the harm caused by television extends today to young people's engagement with the new communication technologies. This article looks at the focus of the public debate, highlighting in particular the scarcity of children's own voices in the discourse. But while they are rarely heard in the public debate, fortunately children's voices have increasingly informed academic research in this field. Much of this research has been conducted overseas especially in the UK and the US. While some excellent research has been done in Australia, it has not been continuous or systematic. After reviewing examples of research both here and overseas, this article goes on to suggest that further research with children in Australia could add significantly to our understanding of how children are engaging with television and of how the new digital technology is changing and broadening this engagement. It suggests too that this research should include the participation of the producers of children's television. This research could focus on how children creatively engage in narratives through both their use of television and the newer media.

## Public panic

The public debate on children and television appears in many ways to have changed very little since television first appeared. Writing in Australia in 1969, John Murray listed the epithets that had accrued to television since its introduction in the 1950s: 'mental chewing gum, the boob tube, the idiot box' (p. 1). He cited critics who warned that the young viewer especially was being

damaged by watching television and 'loses the ability to tell fact from fiction, to pick the important from the unimportant' (p.3). Despite significant advances and two decades of academic research into our understanding of how audiences, including children, engage with television, the public debate largely has not shifted.

'Children at risk from too much TV' (O'Brien, 2011), 'TV Raises Kids' Blood Pressure' (Reuters, 2009), 'Watching TV over Dinner is Bad for Your Family' (Collier, 2011), 'SpongeBob Bad for Four-Year-Olds: Study' (AP, 2011) the headlines declare, fuelling parent anxieties at all levels. These headlines have appeared in Australian online and print newspapers in the past three years and they convey the dominant representation of television in the public discourse. As Catharine Lumby (2006, p.2) writes:

...scores of stories (that) appear every week in newspapers, on current affairs shows, and even in apparently responsible publications targeted at parents, make the claim that television is rotting our children's brains.

Television has generated an industry of advice for parents, from books which give tips on how to negotiate family life, with or without television, to websites. While some of these attempt to incorporate the extensive academic research into the picture, objectively analyse the evidence and allay unfounded fears (Guernsey, 2007; Lumby, 2006), others reinforce the panic (Currey-Wilson, 2007; Pawlowski, 2000).

This public presentation of television as bad for children is particularly stubborn and resistant to research and empirical evidence. In some cases, the headlines for the latest academic research fail to convey the main thrust of its argument, instead focussing on the dominant discourse. A recent online *Herald Sun* story declared: 'Concern over children watching too much television. Some parents are parking their four-year-olds in front of the TV for up to five hours a day'. (Doherty, 2011). Readers could be morally outraged and fearful at the same time but the main thrust of the study on which the news article was based was actually good news for parents and provided nothing to be fearful of. It had found that television 'was not robbing children of time to participate in "unstructured" play' (Doherty, 2011). This point was only cursorily mentioned in the middle of the article.

The most egregious omission from these headline stories is the voice of those about whom they are expressing concern, outrage and moral panic; children's thoughts and ideas are missing. As a result, the overall public discourse is presenting children as having no opinion, or certainly no capacity to express a sensible or valuable opinion. Interestingly, this picture of the passive child flies in the face of the existing body of academic research with children. When researchers ask children themselves about television, the picture of how they use, enjoy, interact with, respond to, and are affected by it, changes. Far from being passive sponges, swelling on the lounge room sofa, children are engaged with what they watch in interesting ways. In fact they seem capable of outdoing the adults in their critical engagement with television. In her 1986 study with more than 800 primary school children in Australia, Patricia Palmer found that children's 'demands and expectations (of television) seem to be greater than those of an adult audience' (1986: 37).

In the absence of children's perspectives, adults are free to project their own fears onto children's use not only of television but of new technologies. With the recent rapid technological changes that appear to be embraced and understood more quickly by children than their parents, adult fear is fuelled by a lack of knowledge about the new media: 'Adults are afraid of

children, afraid of new technologies, and most importantly, afraid of the usage by and reaction of children to digital media and new technologies'. (Jenkins in Banet-Weiser, 2007: 19).

Focusing on children, speaking to them, and finding out how they engage with television is an obvious way to allay fears driven by a lack of facility with new technology and by a panicked public debate. I would also suggest that focusing on the content of television programs, and how children interact with it, rather than on the technology itself could provide more valuable and productive insights into children and television. This approach would have the secondary benefit of moving the debate away from the fear of the 'unknown bogey' of new technology. While this approach seems to make sense, speaking directly to children presents some obstacles.

There has always been resistance from some quarters to engaging directly with children and asking for their thoughts on television. In 1989 Bob Hodge pointed out that the

way children are constructed and appropriated for ideological purposes is itself a part of an important social phenomenon, even if it's a game that only adults are allowed to play. In this game children are expected to be seen but not heard.

Hodge himself does challenge this assumption: 'If anyone bothered to listen to what they see and say, it would quite spoil the game.] (Hodge, 1989, p. 170).

This ideology rests on adult control of children and also suggests that only adults can 'protect' our vulnerable little ones from the unknown dangers lurking in every television. The way this plays out in some cases though, highlights its inadequacy as a way of understanding how children engage with television. In fact comments about children's television by some commentators along these lines are sometimes so far removed from what children might think as to be ridiculous.

In researching preschool children's reactions to the television program Teletubbies, for example, Sue Howard and Susan Roberts (1999) commented on how far the media coverage of one of the show's main characters was removed from the children's perspective. A number of articles in the late 1990s abhorred the apparent presentation of Tinky Winky, a big, goofy, cuddly-looking, purple-costumed character in the show, as a 'gay icon' with a 'somewhat limp' wave and carrying a 'handbag'. In this case the public panic was so widespread that it was backed up by some academics: 'Andrew Medhurst of Sussex University gained some popular press by proclaiming the handbag-wielding Tinky Winky as the world's first preschool gay icon' (*Sydney Morning Herald* in Howard and Roberts, 1999). Not surprisingly, none of the pre-schoolers the two researchers observed in their study of direct children's interactions with the show found any such notions. Adult fears and interpretations were irrelevant to the way in which children actually engaged with the program (Howards and Roberts, 1999).

Listening to children not only provides valuable insights, however, but is a right signed onto by the Australian government when it ratified the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 13 states that children 'have the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds... in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice'. What better media to express their ideas on and through than television – a medium which is central to our lives today.

## What the kids say

The focus on the harmful effects of television that pervades the media discourse has systematically ignored the agency of the audience. Until the early 90s this area of research was patchy in the academic world too. Summarising the history of this research in 1991, Ien Ang suggested that it had not taken account of “the complex and contradictory ways in which television becomes meaningful in people’s everyday lives” (1991: 12). In 1993, David Buckingham looked particularly at young people and the media stating:

There has been very little attempt to investigate the ways in which young people use these media, and the meanings and pleasures they derive from them...they are defined largely as passive victims of powerful and exclusively negative ‘effects’ (Buckingham 1993: 5).

Against this background, three cases with different approaches make interesting (though not the only) exceptions to the disregard of the children’s television audience in the second half of the 20th century: two from the world of television production, and one from academia. In the late 1960s, the Children’s Television Workshop in the United States started production of a new children’s television series with a ground-breaking philosophy. They planned to use research with children in the development of their new television program for children, *Sesame Street*. Research with children was part of a three-way process for the development of the series that joined the TV producers, to education specialists for curriculum content, to the audience (children) for their reaction to the programs (Cohen in Singer and Singer, 2011: 539). Established in 1982, the Australian Children’s Television Foundation (ACTF) has developed an interesting body of research with children. Through a network of primary schools in Australia, ACTF engages with children around their use of the organisation’s learning and teaching tools. These tools are an integral part of the television programs that the ACTF sells to television networks and the research with children provides feedback to the developers of these materials (ACTF, 2012). In the academic field, Australian researcher Patricia Palmer conducted research with 573 children aged 8-12 years. Using a combination of interviews, observation and surveys, she focused on children’s own understanding of television. Palmer looked among other things at their engagement with the content of the programs finding that: ‘Children bring TV stories and events to life again in their talk, activity and games’ (Palmer, 1986: 139). While these three examples have different purposes and methodologies, all put children at the centre of research.

Research with children in the past two decades has been far more systematic than earlier in the last century and has further shown how children engage with television critically and as individuals. It has become apparent that children have strong likes and dislikes, they can learn from television programs, they use the medium to explore their own identities and they are discerning. ‘It is obvious from the children’s comments that, whatever television does to children, it does not switch off their critical faculties’ (Davies, 2001: 206).

David Buckingham’s research in this field has been extensive and has included much work with children. His research has led to a greater understanding of children and television but has recently gone further to explore the convergence of television with the new technologies. He makes a particularly interesting point that could well guide future research with children:

Significant creative and democratic opportunities (exist) in these (new technological) developments, particularly in the potential they offer for children to become producers of media in their own right. New technologies bring hitherto

inaccessible means of cultural expression and communication within children's reach (Buckingham, 2000, 102).

## Storytelling and pleasure

The research done with children particularly in the past 20 years has established a significant body of knowledge in the field, albeit with some gaps. This section of my article looks at some of the existing research into how children engage with the program content, examining in particular what it tells us about how young people engage with narrative both in television viewing and with the new technologies.

In the 1980s Palmer found that children like stories whether in drama, fantasy, cartoons or even factual programs such as documentaries (1986: 28–37). Davies found that when commenting themselves on television: 'Like many adult critics before them, children emphasised performance, social modeling, entertainment and, *above all, the compelling structural power of narrative*' (emphasis added) (2001: 75).

The engagement with narrative is a thread that runs through human lives across the centuries, and across all technologies. From the oral traditions of pre-literate communities through print, and television, to the modern digital era, narratives have been 'central to human experience, and a key way that experience is made meaningful' (Madej, 2003).

The value for children of stories was powerfully articulated in the 1970s by Bruno Bettelheim in his examination of fairy tales. He described how 'the fairy tale uses universal symbols that permit the child to choose, select, neglect, and interpret the tale in ways congruent with his state of intellectual and psychological development' (Bettelheim, 1976: 130).

If narratives are central to the human experience and are a profound part of our psychological makeup, it would seem reasonable that children would continue to look to modern technologies to engage with stories. After all, 6-12 year olds spend about 28 hours a week watching television (McDonough, 2009) so there is plenty of opportunity. This is certainly apparent to the producers of television programs. Children's television producer Oliver Postgate pointed to the 'real staple of television: telling and showing a good story, carefully thought out' (Postgate in Davies, 2010: 170).

But while it is generally acknowledged that narratives in the 'high' arts of theatre and literature are good for children, TV is seen by contrast as down-market and of little value in the narrative tradition. Television is 'rarely viewed as a creative medium of expression in the way that literature, music, film and storytelling are' (Davies, 2010: 147). So while it is generally acknowledged that children's engagement with narrative is a 'good' thing, their engagement with narrative through television, the internet or other modern technologies, is potentially a 'bad' thing.

Research with children however has shown that their engagement with narratives through television can be a rich experience. Obviously there are a variety of different genres and different ways to tell a story – through cartoons, drama or fantasy, soap operas or documentaries. As Palmer (1986) found in her study, children's use of:

...both the structure and content of narratives from TV in their talk and games demonstrated their eagerness to imitate and adapt TV scenarios to their own experience... There seems every reason to believe that, through the stories it tells,

television is one of the main sources of information about social life for children. (pp. 143–4).

Davies spent considerable time seeking children's views about drama and found that:

For children in the study, one of the prime 'uses' of television drama was socialisation: setting good examples; wrongdoers being punished; the good being rewarded... This social role was partly within the personal and family sphere, but they also saw television storytelling as having a moral function in the wider public sphere too' (2001: 68).

Even if critics of the 'trashy' television world might deny the value children see in television programs, and decry any comparison with 'serious' literary traditions, narratives will continue to run through television, and children will continue to engage with them. As Buckingham points out, this engagement of children with narratives is continuing also into the new communication technologies. The development of new and more accessible production techniques and the greater access to public space, through modern digital production technology and social networking sites, have made it possible for children to produce their own stories and share them (Buckingham, 2007: 80). So while television has long been 'the main medium for story-telling in our society' (Palmer, 1986: 143), it is being complemented today with 'new' media in a fascinating overlap: narratives emerging from television are taken up and developed by children using the new technologies.

Despite the panic of the public discourse, not everyone sees the new technologies as a threat to children. 'Digital natives' are being identified by teachers who realise the importance of engaging with children around the new media. Educators are tapping into children's facility with the latest technologies to engage with students. In fact, for some, children's use of the new technologies represents a significant educational opportunity: 'The digital story, which dials into digital natives and connects them with the curriculum, represents one of our most powerful instructional tools today' (Dreon, Kerper, and Landis, 2011).

Dreon and Landis have also identified an important part of the narrative to children – pleasure and humour:

Perhaps as a consequence of YouTube's 10-minute limit to video uploads, digital stories tend to be short, delivered in neat little packages. Therefore, the modern storyteller often uses a framework of humor and music to craft stories that are clever, quick, and funny (Dreon et al, 2011).

The pleasure children derive from television is connected to their understanding of and engagement in the narratives. Yet, while it is obvious from studies with children that the main reason they watch television is because they enjoy it, this area of children's engagement with the medium has attracted the least academic research. In the public discourse, it only appears, if at all, in a negative frame.

From the research that has been done, however, it is obvious that the magic of stories, fantasy and humour engage children in their television viewing. As Davies (2001: 72) discovered:

Despite, ... the emphasis on social value in drama, many children were capable of acknowledging its escapist and psychological pleasures at the same time. One 10-

year-old girl... gave a definition of drama as both pure entertainment, and as universally accessible: 'Drama is something fun for everyone'.

Even pre-schoolers express obvious pleasure when they watch television programs. Roberts and Howard found, in their study with 20 children under the age of two (2005: 105), a strong and enjoyable response to the television program *Teletubbies*: 'A strong feature of the data was young viewer's discovery of pleasure in seeing familiar characters: in responding to music and rhythm; in recognising tricks and rudimentary slapstick'.

## The storytellers

While children's enjoyment of television stories might often be censured in the media, television producers of course actively seek to inspire such enjoyment. The nature of their work has meant television producers have had to consider children's opinions. The most successful producers have actively engaged with children during the production process with the most famous example being *Sesame Street* as mentioned earlier in this article. The ABC in Australia has also used research with children in its development of the long-running program *Play School*. Bringing viewers to the screen is, of course, paramount in television and the producers of *Play School* start at this point by making the show entertaining to the audience. They do not stop there however, but seek to produce a program 'that not only entertains but also engages and empowers the young child as a creative, curious and capable participant' (Harrison, 2004: 50).

As mentioned above producers of children's television programs are strongly aware of the importance of narrative. *Play School* weaves everyday experiences into its programs with the aim of suggesting to its young viewers that "there are interesting stories to be found in everyday experience and that all members of the community have valuable stories to tell" (Harrison, 2004: 55).

Even with preschool children it is possible to 'listen'. This is what the producers of *Teletubbies*, Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport, set out to do. They used 'observations of children in a variety of settings ...to (build) "up a picture...of the child's own perception" and "own way of learning" rather than adult expectations of what children should be achieving' (Wood in Steemers, 2010: 110).

Producers' interpretations of how children engage in narratives, what they find funny, and what they enjoy, directly inform the content and structure of the television stories that they produce. They understand, as the academic research has also discovered, that: 'The amount of attention (children) are prepared to give to individual programs is directly related to whether the visual and audio message has meaning specific to them' (Gunter and McAleer, 1990, p.34).

Davies discusses the ways in which producers interpret children's views of television programs arguing that their insights could be valuable in informing the research into this field:

This group (the producers) can be seen as influential in helping to create new public definitions of childhood, because the material they envisage as appropriate, necessary and entertaining for child audiences and consumers is pervasive through film, television and their related cultural products, and because it reaches the majority of children in industrialised societies from birth (2001: 85).

Because of the role children's television producers play in the context of children's viewing, it would make sense to speak with them about children's use of narrative, fantasy and humour in

any study of children and television. Their understanding of the process of production of audio-visual stories could also inform any investigation of how children are using the new digital media to create their own stories, and how this relates to and overlaps with their engagement with television narratives.

## Discussion

It is apparent, from the research that has been done with children, that they enjoy television and use its narratives to enrich and make sense of their lives. From the limited existing research into their use of the new technologies it appears also that this new world overlaps for them with television. While this research suggests some positives for the child TV viewer in what these new technologies offer, the dominant framing of the public debate largely creates fear about the 'threat' to our young from both existing and new technologies.

It is also clear that despite the public discourse which still suggests children are passive viewers of potentially harmful technology, the academic research has long since moved into fields that examine children as an actively engaged audience. Producers of television programs have also recognised children as consumers who need to be entertained and engaged and, of course, so have advertisers.

While we have analysed what children watch, and how often, and listened to what they like or dislike, examined how they learn from television and understood that they are discerning consumers, have we given them a systematic voice and agency? How can we go further in this direction?

Article 13 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNICEF 1989) states that children have a right to express themselves through any media of their choice but there is doubt about whether this is happening. We rarely hear them in the news media or in the public discourse. Their voices appear in academic research and inform the development of some television production. We should be asking how we can enable their voices to be heard more clearly in a way that would give them agency. I would like to suggest that this could involve research which brings together children, academics and children's television producers.

In the research examined above, I have looked specifically at where research has been conducted with children by academics and by television producers. In Davies's (2001) and Palmer's (1986) research, interviews were conducted directly with children. Both focused on methodologies that were designed as far as possible to allow children to express their own opinions, without influence from parents, teachers or the interviewers. The insights garnered from this research were analysed by Davies and Palmer who drew a number of conclusions about the engagement of children with television. Davies (2001) explicitly states that she has examined the research with a view to informing policy in children's programming at the BBC. In 1986, Palmer was aiming to counteract the dominant discourse and show that children were not television 'zombies'. Her analysis demonstrated this effectively. Research by Roberts and Howard (2005) on how preschool children viewed the *Teletubbies* revealed interesting insights into their enjoyment and engagement with the show. This research, however, was done after the development of the program and not for input into its design.

In the field of television production, the producers of *Sesame Street* have conducted research with children for the development of their series since the 1960s, as I have discussed above. But this model has not been widely adopted. *Play School* has incorporated academic research into its



design (Harrison, 2004) and Nickelodeon has created a brand that sells itself as the champion of children's rights (Banet-Weiser, 2007), though the production of their programs does not involve the systematic research with both children and educational experts as undertaken by *Sesame Street*. The Australian Children's Television Foundation conducts research with children into the educational products associated with its television shows but does not conduct such research about the TV programs themselves.

Interestingly, there is a third space where children's voices can be heard – without the mediation of adults. YouTube and the social networking sites, and the new digital technologies, are providing spaces and resources for children to directly express their own views and display their own creativity. Children's voices are available to be listened to, and available in spaces beyond those provided by academic researchers and television producers. How can we listen to them more effectively and give children agency in those worlds that are still controlled by adults?

I would like to suggest that future research should connect the three key players in children's television that I have mentioned in this article: children, the producers and academics researching the field of children and television. Qualitative research with children and the producers of children's television programs could further the academic research in the field. As noted above, research with producers is limited and research with children in Australia is also patchy. This research could be designed to examine how producers work on children's programs and link these findings to research with children about how they engage with the narratives in these programs. Apart from bringing greater understanding to the field, this research could also prove useful to television producers. As Harrison (2004) notes, the producers of *Play School* have long been guided by academic research in the development of the series.

## Conclusion

*Sesame Street* has shown that television producers can develop successful programs if they listen directly to their audience. Producers of children's television wish to engage and empower their audiences. By connecting academics, producers and children, we could make sure that the child audience is not seen only as a consumer but is given agency and a voice in the development of programs. The interactive nature of the new technologies could well make this easier and could support greater participation of children in the development of television programs. Feedback directly from children, for example, is more readily available to producers today through the 'web and social networking spaces' (Zanker, 2011: 33).

In order to deepen the focus of such research, we could examine children's engagement with the narratives in television programs and investigate the way they use these narratives in their own lives and in their own creative activities. This would give us an insight not only into what children say, but where their voices go. This would be of significant value to television producers, would hopefully illuminate the public discourse and would also bring us a step further to implementing Article 13 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* by giving children a voice in the media.

Qualitative research with children about how they engage with the narratives of television moves the focus from the effects of the technology on children to their engagement with the content. Even if technology changes, as it is rapidly doing, this research would provide an ongoing and valuable understanding of children's engagement with the narratives they find in television and the new digital technologies.

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