

advance his own position in exams and papers; don't degrade your students in the name of efficiency by giving them multiple choice, true/false, or short answer exams. This is a terrible thing to do normally, for such an exam assumes by its very structure that students have nothing worth saying, and it is intolerable in a politicized class, for the student is then left entirely to second-guess the professor's motives in so-called objective questions.

With these dogma-dispelling safeguards installed in classroom controversies, one can at least feel confident

that one is doing the best one can in handing out to students the palm of liberty.

—Richard Mohr

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Children's Television

Afternoon in America, and millions of kids are sprawled on the floor watching television. On one station, the Masters of the Universe (available from Mattel at \$4.97 each) triumph over the forces of evil; on another, the Defenders of the Universe (sold separately for \$3.97 apiece) do the same. Turn the dial, and an animated rubber Gumby figure (in two sizes: \$2.99 and \$1.50) attempts to tug on viewers' heartstrings ("If you've got a heart, then Gumby's a part of you"), his adventures punctuated by commercials for Circus Fun cereal (featuring chocolate-covered marshmallow animals) and Snickers bars. It's hard to resist the conclusion that commercial children's TV is a wasteland.

Yet children aged six to eleven watch an average of twenty-seven hours of television a week, for a total of 1,400 hours a year; preschool children watch even more. By the time the average American child graduates from high school he will have logged more hours in front of the TV than in the classroom. How worried should we be about what our children are watching—and about what's being sold to them as they watch? And should we be trying to do something about it?

It's Not What You Watch

It seems obvious that it is better to have children learning their alphabet on "Sesame Street" than watching shoddy, violence-packed cartoons. But against this it has been suggested that the medium of TV itself dominates any message, for good or ill, it might seek to convey.

Cedric Cullingford, Dean of Educational Studies at Oxford Polytechnic, argues that it doesn't matter what children watch because, "even at its most intense moments," television "can appear as little more than background." Children "associate the pleasures of television with a mild form of boredom," which they

nonetheless turn to fondly because "boredom is so little trouble." Like adults, kids watch TV for "entertainment without demands," and what they watch makes very little impression on them, emotionally or intellectually: "Of all the information that children will have seen over an evening's viewing, of all the hours of action, children remember very little. They know that they have *seen* the programmes but can say almost nothing about them." Thus Cullingford turns a skeptical ear to stories of TV's supposed great dangers to the minds and hearts of youth: TV doesn't *matter* enough to pose any real threat.

Marie Winn, author of *The Plug-in-Drug*, agrees that it doesn't matter what children actually watch on TV, but for the opposite reason: not because watching TV is so harmless, but because it is so harmful. Winn sees television watching as essentially a passive experience, a "one-way transaction" that induces in children a zombie-like state: "The child's facial expression is transformed. The jaw is relaxed and hangs open slightly; the tongue rests on the front teeth. . . . The eyes have a glazed, vacuous look. . . ." Winn also claims that TV, far from powerless, is addicting. She concludes that it doesn't matter what children watch any more than it matters whether an alcoholic drinks Jack Daniels or moonshine. In fact, Winn goes so far as to say that the interests of children are better served by simply broadcasting junk, "since conscientious parents are more likely to limit their children's television intake if only unsavory programs are available." How children of less conscientious parents would fare under unrestrained industry indifference Winn does not say.

The most vociferous advocates of improved content in children's programming have targeted two key areas of concern: on the positive side, the educational potential of television; on the negative side, its pervasive

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violence. The educational promise of television has so far best blossomed in "Sesame Street," launched in 1969 by the Children's Television Workshop with lavish budgets and extraordinary participation by educators. Early studies by the Educational Testing Service in 1970 and 1971 indicated that the young watchers of "Sesame Street" made great gains as a result of their viewing experience, but later studies attributed these rather to concerted parental involvement in the viewing. Teachers report that "Sesame Street" has helped young children to recognize numbers and letters, but this early boost has not translated into improved language skills later in school. Certainly disadvantaged children, however long and hard they stare at the tube, have not caught up academically with children of educated parents. But that television has not been strikingly successful at imparting factual knowledge or teaching language skills does not mean that it teaches nothing. "Sesame Street" may be as important for elevating children's aesthetic tastes or for fostering nonracist attitudes as for drilling the alphabet. Even Cullingford concedes that children pick up from TV such amorphous things as "tone, gestures, and attitudes," which may shape their world view.

By now it is hardly news that American television is violent: by age 5 the typical child in the United States has viewed over 200 hours of violent images and the average fourteen-year-old has witnessed the televised killings of some 13,000 human beings. The number of violent incidents on TV is rivaled only by the number of studies on their effects. The prevailing view seems

to be, to quote the conclusions of the National Institute of Mental Health's 1982 report: "Violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs." Many studies have been criticized, however, as relying too heavily on laboratory simulations; others show a correlation between television viewing and aggressive behavior without proving any causal connection. And definitions of "violence" in television are so elastic that conclusions about its frequency must be drawn with some care, lest a comedian slipping on a banana peel be classed as an incident of violence. It seems fair to say, nonetheless, that violence on children's television, and on television generally, should be monitored vigilantly.

For the rest, does it matter what children watch, or not? Judith Lichtenberg, director of the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy's project on the media, likens the charge that program content doesn't matter to the frequent claim that it doesn't matter *what* children read, only *that* they read. But just as few are convinced that comic books are just as good for young readers as the enduring classics of children's literature, so it is hard to accept that beautifully produced television dramas are just as bad for children as their present alternatives.

A final issue concerns children's advertising. A National Science Foundation study estimates that on average children are exposed to some 20,000 commercial messages each year, most for toys, cereals, candies, and fast-food restaurants. (Few tout, say, the importance of eating spinach.) The NSF report cites evidence that children under eight years of age have substantial difficulty in comprehending the difference between commercials and programs. Younger children also

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express a greater belief in commercials and request advertised products more frequently than more mature youngsters do. This raises special questions about the appropriateness of advertising to children in this age group, particularly when so many of the products advertised (e.g., highly sweetened products) are arguably harmful for them.

Funding Public Television

There are two chief avenues by which these concerns about children's television can be addressed. One is to increase the support given to public television, which generally has superior programming for children and no commercials. According to Edward L. Palmer, Vice President and Senior Research Fellow at the Children's Television Workshop, our PBS lags far behind the British BBC, which airs 840 hours of at-home children's television each year, representing one-eighth of the total program schedule carried on its two stations. Of these, 630 hours (75 percent) are newly produced programs. By contrast, PBS carries about 150 hours a year of new children's programming, with repeat programming hovering just short of 90 percent. Palmer sees investment in children's television as a singular bargain: the cost of "Sesame Street" averaged over the more than nine million preschoolers who tune in the show comes to less than a penny a day per original program. Even a children's programming budget adequate to provide daily programming for all age groups (which Palmer puts at \$62.4 million) is, he points out, but a tiny fraction of the over \$100 billion we spend each year in this country on public education.

The implied analogy is that the same reasons that lead us to support public education should lead us to support public television. We support public education because we have a common interest in preparing future citizens to participate intelligently in our democracy and because we want, both for prudential and for moral reasons, to help children grow up into capable, employable adults. If some cold water is dashed on television's hopes as an educator, these arguments cannot directly translate into support for publicly funded programming. But much of the curriculum of our schools is not specifically designed to turn children into future voters and workers, but to enhance their lives, and our collective life, in other ways. The rest of us have a stake in how young minds and hearts are formed and how America's children spend the better part of their waking days. Improving the quality of television seems as important an objective as, say, offering art and music appreciation classes, or physical education, in the schools.

Public television is often criticized as coercively elitist. Aren't some select groups taxing the majority to provide programs catering only to their high-brow tastes? Whatever their general merits, such arguments fail to convince when the issue is children's television. No one denies that paternalism is justified with children or that adults—parents, teachers, society at large—are entitled, indeed obligated, to shape and mold children's prefer-

ences and values. We cannot appeal to children's existing tastes to determine what should be offered to them, since their tastes are in flux and will be determined largely by what in fact we offer.

Regulating Commercial Television

However rich the offerings on public television, the audience for it seldom exceeds 5 percent of the population. If we are to make any significant effect on what children are actually watching, we must consider mandating certain levels of quantity and quality for children's programming on commercial stations and regulating children's advertising—or banning it altogether.

Regulation of the broadcast media has always been more stringent than regulation of the print media, based partly on the argument that since broadcast outlets are licensed by the government, it is appropriate for government to allocate them in a way that serves the public interest. But regulation of the media, and of advertising as well, raises charges that it conflicts with freedom of expression.

Lichtenberg replies that measures to give neglected groups greater access to the media do not conflict with the objectives underlying freedom of expression but indeed support them. We want freedom of expression in part because we oppose censorship: one should not be prevented from thinking, reading, writing, listening—or broadcasting—as one sees fit. But opposition to censorship does not exhaust our interest in freedom of expression, in Lichtenberg's view. We also want diversity of expression to flourish; we want to hear a multiplicity of voices. And this can include the voices of children and voices speaking directly to their concerns and needs. Freedom of expression rests on both the rights and interests of speakers and the rights and interests of listeners. Certainly the rights and interests of children as speakers have traditionally been ignored ("Children should be seen and not heard"); they are an all but voiceless group in the public sphere. But their rights and interests as listeners have been neglected as well, and improving children's programming would work to redress this imbalance.

Advertising, too, is a form of expression, and free speech arguments can be given for protecting commercials as well as the content of programs. However, courts have not extended to commercial speech the full range of First Amendment protections. The Federal Trade Commission requires that advertisements be truthful and that their factual claims be substantiated, requirements that would not be tolerated in other realms of discourse. And, according to philosopher Alan Goldman, any moral right to advertise "does not include a right to defraud, or moral license to mislead people into buying harmful products."

Goldman suggests that we need to consider "first, the audience to whom the advertisement is addressed, and second, the degree of increased risk of serious harm from being misled into use or misuse of the product. If a specific audience is addressed, typical members of that audience ought not to be misled. But

as the risk of serious harm increases, the prohibition against deception must become more strict in order to prevent deception of less circumspect consumers."

Both considerations are crucial in assessing advertisements targeted to children. With adults the standard presumption, perhaps mistaken, is that the typical consumer is able to recognize the persuasive intent of commercials and discount their claims accordingly. But with young children at least, the *typical* viewer is far more susceptible to the manipulations of Madison Avenue. With adults we can say, "If people are gullible or careless enough to fall for *that*, so much the worse for them." But the vulnerability of children cannot be dismissed in this way, and when children are deliberately or inadvertently misled by commercials, standards of truth in advertising are compromised.

How much harm is done to children by their naive trust in advertisements? It might be argued that any harm is relatively minor, since final purchasing decisions are made by adults, who should be able to assess the merits of the coveted products more wisely. Of course, a whining child can wear away many a parent's better judgment, but the purchase is still mediated through an adult's judgment. (Children's vitamin ads were removed from the air because the vitamins were directly consumed—eaten—by children in toxic quantities.) Children may in the end be worse off, of course, if they wheedle their parents into feeding them junk food and straining the family budget by foolish toy purchases. And if we are concerned about the effects of television on children's values and attitudes, we have

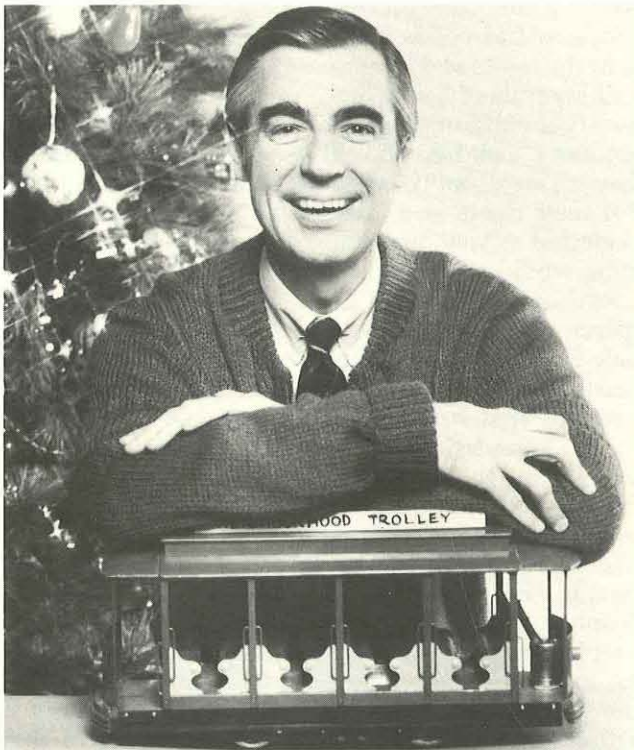
to worry about the relentless materialism that bombards young viewers via the constant stream of commercial messages.

What Should We Do?

The political climate at present makes unlikely both any increase in funding for public television and any tougher guidelines for advertisers and programming directors. In 1983 the Federal Trade Commission ruled against Action for Children's Television's long-standing petition for reforms that would require all stations to broadcast a minimum of 14 hours of children's programming each week and would ban all advertisements on children's programs. A bill is now pending in Congress (H.R. 3216) that would set a more modest programming goal and "investigate" program-length commercials like "He-Man." Its chances are less than good. In the meantime, parents can take advantage of a technological marvel called the off button. It may be the most potent weapon parents now have against low-quality children's television.

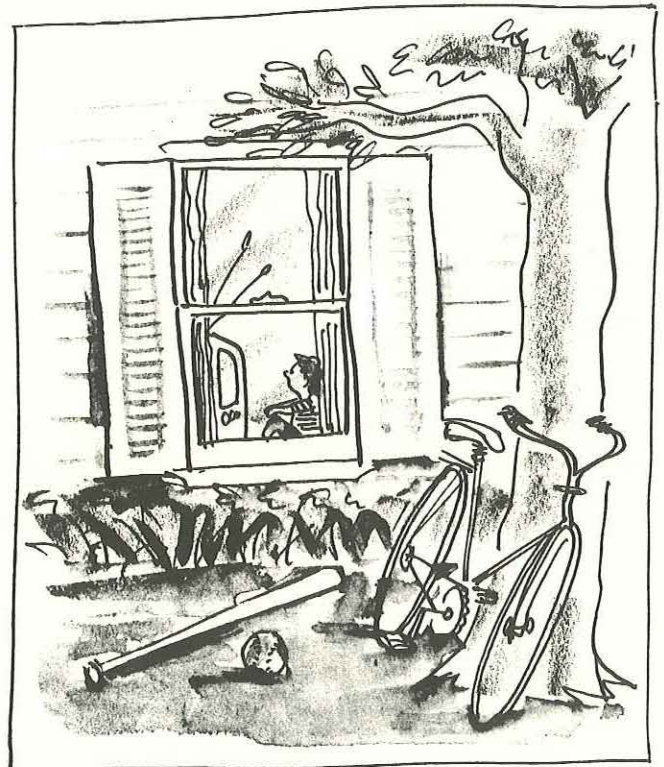
—Claudia Mills

Sources quoted in this article are: Cedric Cullingford, *Children and Television* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Marie Winn, *The Plug-In-Drug* (New York: Viking, rev. ed. 1985); Edward L. Palmer, "Providing Quality Television for America's Children," in *The Future of Children's Television: Results of the Markle Foundation/Boys Town Conference* (Boys Town: The Boys Town Center, 1984); Alan Goldman, "Ethical Issues in Advertising," in *Just Business*, edited by Tom Regan (New York: Random House, 1984); and Judith Lichtenberg, "Free Speech, Diversity, and Access to the Press" (manuscript), and conversation.



PBS

Action for Children's Television



Are children spending more time in Mr. Rogers's neighborhood than in their own?