

Lesley Osborne, Manager Standards and Stephen Nugent, Manager Research report on the Second World Summit on Television and Children, held in London in March.

Spotlight on children's television by Lesley Osborne

Debate at the Second World Summit on Television for Children reflected the change that is occurring in broadcasting and communications. Familiar themes of diversity, quality, funding and politics dominated but against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive and fragmented market for children's television: specialist children's channels, transnational services, and interactive media.

Children's channels

The increasing significance of specialised children's channels was reflected in the summit's principal sponsor, Nickelodeon. Research on current programming expenditure and future intentions illustrates this trend. Combined Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon now far outstrips that of general broadcasters such as BBC and ITV. Expenditure on original programs by children-only channels is predicted to increase while free-to-air channels are more likely to maintain or decrease current levels of spending on children's programs. Increased competition from new services is encouraging general broadcasters to concentrate on the older audience demographic, traditionally the more important audience for ratings and advertisers. Some European public broadcasters are responding by launching specialised channels, such as Germany's KinderKanal, and the BBC has plans for a children's service when digital broadcasting commences.

Competitive pressure can also influence the diversity offered by broadcasters. For example, recent research there has been an increase in animated programs for children since the advent of subscription services in the UK. Questions are also being asked for the first time about how well broadcast television is serving British children.

Regional forums

Providing quality children's programs which are appropriate for local audiences remains a challenge for most countries. This is particularly evident for regions such as South Africa where age-specific media for children is but one of a range of pressing social and economic needs, or for Eastern Europe which is undergoing intense cultural and economic change.

The issues facing South Africa, Eastern Europe, South America and Asia respectively were considered at specific regional forums. Perhaps because of television's potential for social change in the developing world and because the perceived challenges are urgent, the regional forums were much appreciated, with calls to expand the involvement of delegates from developing countries in future summits. Delegates from UNICEF emphasised television's role in the struggle to achieve the recognition of children's rights, particularly in countries where discrimination and exploitation continue. Broadcasters from all countries were asked to support a number of community service campaigns developed by UNICEF to raise awareness of children's rights and help all children understand other cultures.

Australia's experience

Funding support and regulation were two recurrent themes in debates about the failure of 'the market' to provide quality television for children and particularly local children's programs. Here Australia's experience is relevant. Given our small population and vulnerability to other English language programming, the ABA's Children's Television Standards, with quotas for



quality children's programs including Australian children's drama, have played a major part in ensuring the broadcast of such programs. But as Janet Holmes a Court pointed out in her keynote address on funding of children's television, regulation does not produce programs, money does! The financial support provided to Australian producers by government was described by Janet Holmes a Court as essential to the production of Australian children's drama programs. But today this has to be supplemented by contributions from a range of sources—licence fees, overseas pre-sales and co-productions. Within this mix the cultural specificity of programs must be retained.

New media

Increasingly children's television producers and broadcasters are moving into interactive media, especially with associated Web sites. There was a recognition that, at least in developed countries, many children are already at home with digital technology which gives them more personal and flexible entertainment. There were concerns about access for all children to new technology and also a questioning of how new media will be used. In this regard, many of the on-line projects presented at the summit had an educational focus. Two examples are the European Broadcasting Union's site

which aims to give European children a shared understanding of European culture, and the use of virtual reality to enrich the lives of ill and disabled children in Japan.

Teletubbies

The view that children's media should do more than simply entertain was at the heart of the much publicised debate about the 'Teletubbies'. In contrast with the Melbourne summit where 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' and violence divided delegates, the BBC's pre-school program 'Teletubbies' raised the issue of the contribution of 'culturally non-specific' television to preschoolers' experience and development, and the role of merchandising in shaping creative strategies for children's television.

Future summits

The Second World Summit built on the success of the 1995 Melbourne Summit in raising the political profile of children's television and advancing the issues. The event also provided an opportunity to showcase children's programs and multi-media services, to instigate some international co-operative ventures, and participate in masterclasses such as animation, puppetry and working with children. Children also had a chance to be seen and heard in major debates, with 31 junior delegates from around the world, including Australia, talking about television today and what they would like in the future. When the children presented their vision on the last day it mirrored in many ways the goals for children's television set by adult delegates.

The Children's Television Charter came out of the first summit, and it has been carried forward at regional summits in Manila and Africa. Chair of the London summit, Anna Home reported on ways in which the Charter had contributed to policy making for children's television, and how the soon to be established Summit Foundation might assist in program support for less wealthy countries.

Planning has begun on the third summit to be held in Greece with the fourth summit to be hosted in a developing region such as South America.

Research at the summit

by Stephen Nugent

Research was the focus of a special session at the Second World Summit on Television for Children. Held during the 'Politics' theme day, the session was titled 'What's the use of research?'. It addressed various issues including the role of research in understanding children's relationships with television and the use of research by producers, policy-makers, regulators, lobbyists and others concerned with children's television.

Attended by 120 summit delegates, the session was chaired by Mr Gareth Grainger, ABA Deputy Chairman. A panel of six researchers presented different perspectives on the use of research. Viewpoints from academia, industry, media regulation and child rights advocacy were presented. The panellists also brought perspectives from a variety of countries:

- David Buckingham, Institute of Education, UK;
- Cecilia von Feilitzen, International Clearinghouse on Children and Violence on the Screen, Sweden;
- Tatiana Merlo-Flores, Universidad Catolica, Argentina;
- Stephen Nugent, ABA, Australia;
- Shelley Pasnik, Center for Media Education, USA; and
- Maria Emilia Brederode de Santos, formerly of Children's Youth Department Radio and Television, Portugal.

A lively discussion followed the presentations by panel members. Issues debated included:

- the importance of research in understanding children's use of media;
- recognition of the contribution of different types of research to this understanding;
- the need to make better use of existing research and to guard against the misuse of research;
- the need to develop new methodologies including the use of technology to gather research data;
- future directions for research on children and media violence;
- implications of digital media and the associated fragmentation of audiences for research; and
- research issues arising from varying definitions of 'the child' both within countries and between countries.

The ABA invited participants to provide their names and contact details for follow-up, and to join

the ABA-coordinated International Research Forum on Children and Media (IRFCAM).

While this session was the only one with research as the sole focus, many others included the presentation of research findings or discussion of the importance and benefits of research. For example, 'What's happening in the bedroom—Young people and new media', presented research from India, Italy, UK and USA on the changing media environment of young people. The UK research was part of an international comparative study which gathered data on media ownership, access and use by young people in a number of European countries. The research focused on media in the homes of young people under 17 years of age including media in the bedrooms of these young people. Topline results were reported at the summit and a detailed report on the research, which covers many of the same issues as the ABA's 1995 research *Families and Electronic Entertainment*, is expected to be published later in 1998.

Research was again on the agenda on the final day of the summit when Mr Grainger presented a report on the meeting of the International Scientific Committee of the Young People and Media Research Forum, held on the middle day of the summit. Mr Grainger reported on plans for the second international researchers forum which is due to be held in the year 2000. He said that the first, held at the UNESCO headquarters in France in April 1997, had highlighted the need for a series of international fora focused on children and media research issues to be held in parallel with the more broadly focused world summits.



At the summit: the junior delegates developed a children's charter on electronic media, and (above) presented their findings to a full session of the summit. For copies of the charter, call Lesley Osborne on (02) 9334 7700.